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EDITED BY
Anastassia Zabrodskaja,
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REVIEWED BY
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University of Jyväskylä, Finland
Jasmin Peskoller,
University of Innsbruck, Austria

*CORRESPONDENCE
Fred Dervin
✉ fred.dervin@helsinki.fi

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'Inter-ideologicality' in intercultural communication education: co-constructing criticality around the concept of culture in international online student mobility

Jun Peng and Fred Dervin*

Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

The world has been experiencing huge upheavals since the COVID-19 crises. Conflicts caused by opposing ideologies, economic-political agendas and realities are rampant within or across borders. Such unsteady circumstances contribute to shifting how Transnational Education (TNE) occurs worldwide, as well as the scientific, epistemic and educational discourses that go with it. Anchored within critical interculturality, this paper explores the concept of 'inter-ideologicality'. The study looks at short-term online international student mobility to demonstrate how students from China and Finland navigate and negotiate ideologies around the concept of culture in intercultural research and education. The study also employs Wang Chong's perspectives on criticality to identify emerging ideologies in the co-construction of criticality in students' online cooperation. Findings reveal that (1) two ideological orientations, nation-oriented and society-oriented, developed during discussions about culture; (2) Finnish students used a specific form of reasoning to contradict Chinese students' thoughts about Finland by means of criticality towards the nation-oriented ideology; (3) Chinese and Finnish students employed questioning and challenging to help each other be aware of something left unsaid about the status of women in their societies within the society-oriented ideology. The study represents an important meta-approach to intercultural communication education within internationalization of Higher Education, aimed at supporting mobile students to reflect critically on the scientific and educational notion of interculturality rather than providing them with ready-made recipes as to how to communicate and behave interculturally.

KEYWORDS

intercultural communication, inter-ideologicality, criticality, international students, online mobility, transnational education

1 Introduction

Today, the world appears to be divided into different ideological spheres and cocoons which influence the well-being of human beings and interrogate, amongst other things, both the value and operativity of internationalization of higher education. The current brutal wars (e.g., Israel-Gaza war, Ukraine-Russia war, China-U.S. economic 'war') caused by differing values, ideologies and economic-political agendas are splitting our globalized world into

distinct and yet (still) interrelated pieces. In front of such horrors, as researchers and educators, we often feel powerless and helpless. Nevertheless, we are not discouraged. In this paper, we address the neologism of 'inter-ideologicality'- negotiating the many and varied ideologies of intercultural communication that are put into action when we 'do' interculturality with others (Dervin and Simpson, 2020; Dervin, 2022, 2023; Peng and Dervin, 2022, 2023) – to shed a new light on Transnational Education (TNE).

We are always involved in 'ideological wars' in our daily life, which are caused by different understandings and constructions of the world, which might lead to different realities. While writing this paper, the first author, as an international doctoral researcher from Mainland China, had to confront some of these 'ideological wars' during her studies in Europe. In Paris, in spring 2023, such learning experiences included repeated strikes, demonstrations and constant critiques of both president and government to display French people's attachment to 'liberté' ('liberty'/'freedom'). However, this kind of freedom seemed illusionary in her own French language learning experiences. Freedom was banished every time she was told 'pas d'anglais' ('No English'). As a new French learner going to formal French classes and informal workshops to learn the language with the hope of seeing 'a view of the open sky' (Woolf, 1929), she felt frustrated. The frustration came from the moments that she was not allowed to express herself only because she was a new language learner in another country. Her irritation also came from the moments she recalled the timid learners, from different ages, social classes, skin colors, and genders, whom she had met in class in Paris and who had gone through similar experiences. The first author of this paper would never have known how hard it is to be an 'outsider' in a new society if she had not lived through these ideological tensions.

This short detour via a concrete experience hints at one essential characteristic of intercultural communication, which is rarely discussed in the literature: 'ideological wars' or 'ideological conflicts' (Mannheim and Wirth, 1936). 'Efficacious though subtle, and invisible yet impassable' ideologies are often hidden in intercultural communication (Derrida, 1998, p. 68; Dervin, 2022, 2023). The example of the 'monolanguage of the other' in this narrative about one of the authors' experiences in Paris demonstrates well that 'the other is [could be] recognized as mortal finite, in a state of neglect, and deprived of any horizon of hope' in intercultural communication (Derrida, 1998, p. 68).

In this paper, we focus on a specific type of TNE, short-term online international student mobility, during which Chinese and Finnish students had the chance to exchange understandings and constructions of concepts about intercultural communication. Different from many other virtual exchanges which focus on the phenomenal aspects of intercultural communication (e.g., intercultural experience, intercultural competence, language learning, see Rienties et al., 2022), our short-term online international student mobility focuses on epistemological aspects of intercultural communication, rather than, e.g., preparing students to 'do' interculturality 'efficiently' and 'successfully' together. Dervin (2022) has pinpointed the important difference between *interculturality as a concrete (and complex) phenomenon* (people from different groups interacting with each other and trying to 'function' well together) and *interculturality as a meta-perspective* (a multifaceted scientific, educational and ideological approach that needs to be renegotiated again amongst scholars, students and educators from different economic-political contexts and in different languages). This paper contributes to the second perspective and does not aim to either observe or assess, e.g., students' intercultural competence. Our hypothesis is that discussions surrounding intercultural as a meta-perspective can help interculturalists increase their awareness of the complexities of interculturality, reflect further on their own takes and (maybe) meet others in new and re-negotiated/—negotiable ways.

We aim to show how intercultural ideologies are navigated and re-negotiated by both Chinese and Finnish students during online discussions about fundamental concepts of intercultural communication such as the old and central concept of culture. Epistemologically, the study shifts the understanding of intercultural communication from 'culture-oriented' or 'nation-oriented' to negotiating (hidden) ideologies in intercultural interactions. Pedagogically, the study addresses the impact of short-term online mobility on problematizing and operationalizing interculturality as a meta-perspective in TNE.

In the next section, we delve into the theoretical framework of our study. This will encompass our interpretation of the term 'inter-ideologicality' based on Dervin's (2022) proposals for intercultural communication education, and drawing upon Althusser's (1971) theory of 'ideology in general'. Additionally, we explore the significance of criticality.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Inter-ideologicality in intercultural communication education

The term of ideology has been used increasingly in research on intercultural communication education for the past 10 years, following the publication of Holliday's (2010) *Intercultural Communication and Ideology*. In the book Holliday examines critically how ideologies such as *essentialism* (identity as a static feature of who we are) and *culturalism* (culture as a solid explanation for everything people say and do in intercultural encounters) dominate global research and education on interculturality. Instead of these dominating ideologies of the time, Holliday (2010) proposed *non-essentialism* and *non-culturalism*, which now seem to govern in turn global research on interculturality. In his work, Dervin (e.g., Dervin and Simpson, 2020; Dervin, 2022) added to the study of ideologisms in relation to intercultural communication education by problematizing the argument that every take on interculturality in research and education *cannot but be* ideological since they all represent specific orders about the treatment and relationships between 'us' and 'them'. Inspired by the work of French philosopher Althusser (e.g., 1971) Dervin (2022) added that the non-ideological is always ideological, i.e., considering other scholars' and educators' perspectives on interculturality through the lens of ideology, while neglecting our own ideological takes, is counter-productive (see, Chen, 2024). This paper contributes to problematizing further this important shift by examining how students engaged in international mobility deal with inter-ideologicality by listening to each other's linguistic and discursive takes on interculturality as a meta-perspective and attempting to move forward together 'inter-ideologically'.

Let us now reflect further on the very word of *ideology*. Usually, the notion of ideology or ideologies brings to mind a first understanding related to a 'political flavor'. In other words, a form of consciousness which denotes political agendas from a certain group of people in a given society (Geuss, 1981; Freeden, 2003). In Chinese, 'ideology' is translated into '意识形态' (yì shí xíng tài) whose literal translation is 'a form of consciousness' (DeepL Translator 2024a). '意识' refers to 'consciousness' and '形态' to 'form'. By looking into the notion of ideology in different languages and how the translation connotes the word, we can see that the notion of ideology is often given a 'political flavor'. We also note that ideology can be labeled as a 'negative' term when talked about, discussed about, and researched (Eagleton, 1994).

However, we maintain that the original meaning of ideology does not align with this kind of 'political negative flavor' (Mannheim and Wirth, 1936; Althusser, 1971). From an etymological point of view, ideology in English derives from the Greek 'idea-' and '-logos' (see, New Oxford American Dictionary, 2024). 'Idea-' refers to 'form or pattern' and '-logos' denotes 'discourse and compilation'. In this sense, ideology designates a collection of forms or patterns. As noted by Dervin (2022), who introduced the work of sociologist and political thinker Roucek (1944) in the field of intercultural communication education, ideology corresponds to 'patterns of thoughts' of 'a certain social group' (p. 479). It is interesting to note here that 'thought' or 'idea' in Chinese is translated into '思想' (sī xiǎng) (DeepL Translator, 2024b). '思' represents everything people worry about according to the ancient Chinese book *Hong Fan* (Han Dian Dictionary, 2024). Chinese philosopher Wang Chong (27-c. 97 C.E.) correlates imagination to thoughts. He asserts that when people indulge in thoughts, they might imagine something which does not exist (e.g., ghosts). Althusser's (1971) definition of ideology, 'the imaginary representation of the real world', resonates with the meaning of 思. In this sense, 'man is an ideological animal by nature' (Althusser, 1971, p. 171; see Dervin and Simpson, 2020).

The omnipresence of ideologies in every aspect of our lives pushes us to move forward to focusing on 'inter-ideologicality' in intercultural communication (see Dervin and Simpson, 2020; Dervin, 2022, 2023). In his work, Althusser (1971) employs a critical approach to the classic Marxist definition of ideology, i.e., 'a system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group' (Althusser, 1971, p. 158). Instead, Althusser proposes a theory of 'ideology in general' which highlights that 'ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (Althusser, 1971, p. 162). For Althusser (1971), particular ideologies (e.g., religious ideology, cultural ideology, and political ideology) are 'world outlooks' which are largely imaginary. However, the imaginary representation of the world found in a given ideology can reflect the conditions of existence of man, i.e., their real world (Althusser, 1971, p. 164).

In this study, we employ Althusser's (1971) 'ideology in general' to emphasize that individuals involved in 'doing' intercultural communication are 'ideological subjects', whose ideas represent their imaginary relations to 'conditions of existence' (i.e., reality). Althusser also claims that 'there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects' (Althusser, 1971, p. 170). As such, for Dervin, (2022, 2023), the process of intercultural communication corresponds to negotiating ideologies of the subjects, whereby researchers, educators and students are encouraged to move out from their own 'ideological cocoon' in order to revise and reshape their ideological takes on the notion of interculturality together with others (Dervin, 2022, p. 69). This corresponds to what we call *inter-ideologicality* in this paper.

In what follows, we focus on the process of inter-ideologicality around the old and core concept of *culture* in intercultural communication (as in inter-CULTURAL-ity) which is discussed by all our participants in the online international mobility under review. Although the concept of culture has been highly criticized and deconstructed (Holliday, 2010), it is still very much in use in both scholarship and education. 'Culture' that we call and see is the 'conscious part' of that 'culture' which is the whole way of life (Eliot, 1948; Raymond, 1958, p, 254). This resonates with Althusser (1971) who argues that concepts that compose ideology are the imaginary representations that individuals hold, express, interpret, and (de) construct.

Concepts, on the one hand, have been changing with 'the history and progress' of society (Husserl, 1965; Koselleck, 2018). On the other hand, they reflect how ideas/ideologies are shaped within 'historical contexts' and around 'external events and practices' (Freeden, 2003, p. 72). From a conceptual historical perspective, ideologies manifested around concepts are 'relational' and 'conditioned' in a global political background, changing and exchanged through 'individuals' experience with, e.g., the spread of technology (Koselleck, 2018; p. 67; also see, Child, 2015).

All in all, our study aims to 'disrupt the very conceptual tenets' of intercultural communication education and research (Dervin, 2023, p. 1). In the study, based on the aforementioned understanding of ideologies and concepts, we focus on the kinds of ideologies that emerge when discussing a core concept such as culture. This means that we do not focus on the 'fixed' definitions of culture here but on the ideologies navigated and negotiated in intercultural research and education. In other words, we try to look into the 'diachronic and synchronic facts selective in a web of resourceful imagination' (Freeden, 2003, p. 75), since, as we stated above, ideologies are the imaginary representations of our relations to reality (Althusser, 1971). The interpretation of concepts influenced by individuals' experiences represents a wide range of hidden yet prevailing ideologies concerning interculturality (Child, 2015; Marques and Wikforss, 2020).

2.2 Co-constructing criticality

Criticality is highlighted in intercultural communication education by many scholars (Dervin, 2023; Hauerwas et al., 2021). The term of criticality seems to be used interchangeably with other terms such as *critique, criticism*, and *critical thinking*. In this section, we discuss what criticality means in this paper, why we need criticality in intercultural communication education today, and how to 'do' criticality. The Greek origin 'criticus' of the word criticality means to *separate, distinguish* or *discern* (McLeod, 2018; Bitter, 2023; Wesche, 2023). This 'discriminative ability' is regarded as the natural ability of human beings as McLeod (2018) shows in his discussion of Chinese ancient philosopher Wang Chong's criticality. What is more, for Foucault (1997), criticality is 'virtue in general' whereby virtue concerns a practice of a given subject (p. 383). It always concerns how we act and react. Criticality, for the thinker, only 'exists in relation with something other than itself' (Foucault, 1997, p. 383). In other words, criticality is a practice conducted by

subjects who are always involved in relations with others. Criticality here as a practice emphasizes the agency of subjects who have the 'natural discriminative abilities' which provide access to the world of truth (McLeod, 2018, p. 118).

Jaeggi (2009) further maintains that critiques of ideology aim to criticize domination that creates the impression of 'unchallengeable social situations and self-other relations' (p. 65). The practice of ideology critique demonstrates 'the inner inconsistencies of a given situation from the self-contradictions' in knowledge-power relations (Jaeggi, 2009, p. 65). In other words, individuals who are always involved in knowledge-power relations 'yell out' their problems and contradictions in reality by criticizing (Foucault, 1997; Butler, 2002). The 'inner inconsistencies' characteristic of the practice of criticality is thus an 'ongoing social process of self-understanding', essential for intercultural communication (Jaeggi, 2009, p. 80; Xu, 2022). The practice of criticality itself corresponds to the freedom of individuals to try to 'move between perspectives, rather than being stuck in a single narrow perspective, within its own fixed valuations and distinctions, moral or otherwise' (McLeod, 2018, p. 109) in order not to be governed in a knowledge-power nexus (Foucault, 1997; Butler, 2002).

In what follows we discuss criticality as a practice, or how to 'do' criticality, based on Wang Chong's engagement with criticality in his book《论衡》(*Lunheng* hereafter). Wang Chong is often seen as the most 'critical' and radical Chinese philosopher who criticized the main Ancient Chinese philosophers' concepts and ideas in his book [e.g., Confucius, see McLeod, 2018 and Xu, 2022]. In *Lunheng*, Wang Chong questions (问) and challenges (难) the dominant knowledge of his era. McLeod (2018) calls questioning and challenging (问难) the main methods of Wang Chong's criticality. The excerpt from *Lunheng* below illustrates why and how using questioning and challenging fits well with the idea of criticality:

> 圣人之言，不能尽解，说道陈义，不能辄形。不能辄形，宜问以发之；不能尽解，宜难以极之。(问孔篇).
>
> **Translation:** The statements of sages may not be easy to fully comprehend, and their messages may not be immediately clear. In case you do not grasp their meaning right away, you should ask questions to start a discussion. If you are unable to comprehend their statements completely, you should challenge them until you can fully understand them. (From the Wen Kong Chapter).

In this excerpt, Wang Chong maintains that questioning and challenging are the methods for 求实 ('attainment of truth') (McLeod, 2018, p. 84). Questioning here refers to initiating questions to start a discussion when one does not grasp others' meaning right away (Wang Chong, 2020, Wen Kong Chapter). On the other hand, Challenging means to dispute others' statements until fully understanding them if unable to comprehend completely (Wang Chong, 2020, Wen Kong Chapter). To question and to challenge mean to engage with the 'certainty' of what we understand, e.g., knowledge of intercultural communication in this paper (Foucault, 1997; Butler, 2002; Jaeggi, 2009). This 'certainty' could be seen as the dominant ideologies disseminated by institutional structures found in a given society to individuals who have no choice but apply them to their everyday lives (Foucault, 1997).

In the rest of the paper, we consider criticality as a practice that is co-created by individuals who question and challenge their own understandings of intercultural knowledge from a virtue epistemological perspective (Foucault, 1997; Butler, 2002; McLeod, 2018). Epistemological certainty (Butler, 2002), which concerns how we understand knowledge, is deemed to be questionable and challengeable (Foucault, 1997). For Butler (2002), to criticize epistemological certainty means to have a 'right' to question and ask about 'the limits of knowing' and knowledge (p. 227). Based on this perspective, criticality, in this study, is described as 'constructive-performative' 'asking about the limits of knowing' (Butler, 2002; Jaeggi, 2009, p. 79).

Through our forthcoming data analysis, we thus propose to question and challenge the epistemological certainty of intercultural knowledge as well as ideologies found behind discourses of intercultural communication education (see Dervin, 2022, 2023). In the study, students are provided with a platform to practice criticality by exchanging and un-re-thinking different perspectives in online mobility. We argue that this could enable them to broaden their interpretation of the world and renew their understanding of the framework in which they operate both socially and personally (Jaeggi, 2009). Based on what we have discussed about inter-ideologicality and criticality, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the different ideological orientations that emerge around the core concept of culture in intercultural communication education during the short-term online international mobility of students?
2. How do participants navigate and negotiate the different ideological orientations around the concept of culture, which we assume will be dominating students' discussions?
3. How do students co-construct criticality while navigating and negotiating ideologies?

3 Methodology

3.1 Analytical framework

Content analysis is deemed an efficient method for tracking 'emerging ideas', which is fitting to identify ideologies during students' online dialogs (Krippendorff, 2004; Li, 2017; Mayring, 2022). As a central companion to content analysis, we employ Wang Chong's three ways of criticality as a 'reading guide' to analyze the co-construction of criticality amongst the students (McLeod, 2018; Xu, 2022). The three components of Wang Chong's criticality include: *analogical reasoning, questioning* and *challenging*. By identifying these elements in the data, we aim to both identify their ideological orientations and (re-)positioning as well as the way they (re-)construct criticality itself.

In our study, dialog represents the basis for co-constructing criticality (Wesche, 2023, p. 262). As such, students compare together what they have known to what they have assumed in order to find out the 'truth of reality' (McLeod, 2018). This is referred to as analogical reasoning by Wang Chong in *Lunheng* (Xu, 2022). During their dialogs Chinese and Finnish students question and challenge something they do not necessarily fully understand (McLeod, 2018, p. 89). Analogical reasoning, as used by Wang Chong (Xu, 2022),

refers to a comparison between two things, typically for the purpose of explanation or clarification (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2024). According to Xu (2022, pp. 75–76), this is typical of a 'Chinese way of thinking' as 'a conceptual tool'. Wang Chong's analogical reasoning aims to bridge the gap between epistemology and metaphysics, which refers to the difference between what people know and the fundamental nature of being and the world around them (Xu, 2022, p. 79). In the analysis below, analogical reasoning represents the process of explaining what the participants perceive and the reality they are involved in.

As asserted in the previous section, on top of analogical reasoning, 问 (wen/to question) and 难 (nan/to challenge) correspond to two other main ways of criticality, as employed by Wang Chong to criticize the dominant knowledge, ideologies, and phenomena in Ancient China (McLeod, 2018). For us, to question and to challenge is to refuse 'easy answers' and to explore the dominant ideas or ideologies in a given individual's own understandings of intercultural communication (see Foucault, 1997; Butler, 2002; Jaeggi, 2009). To question and to challenge correspond to the processes of negotiating the 'mysteries' that we do not fully understand in intercultural communication (McLeod, 2018).

Based on content analysis and Wang Chong's three interrelated critical methods (e.g., analogical reasoning, questioning and challenging) (McLeod, 2018; Xu, 2022), this study aims to identify emerging ideologies around the concept of culture in intercultural communication education while students co-reconstruct their criticality together.

3.2 Data description

The data are derived from a three-month virtual exchange project between two Chinese universities and one Finnish university (FU) (see details in Table 1). The two Chinese universities had different profiles: while Chinese University 1 (CU1) was multidisciplinary, Chinese University (CU2) specialized in Chinese Minzu 'ethnic' affairs. The virtual exchange project was part of courses on intercultural communication education, although different courses were offered at each partner university. Based on a shared curriculum model [see Helm and Acconcia, 2019], teachers participated in the project as designers, collaborating to create tasks requiring their students to interact and integrate the virtual exchange into their own intercultural communication courses. This was done to provide students with an intercultural experience. Teachers conducted their main courses and supported students in arranging their online intercultural meetings. Each course had its own modes of assessment and outcomes, which is not the focus of this study.

This study examines the project which aimed to understand 'what interculturality is' by looking into how students form and modify their understandings of the notion when they work together across, e.g., ideological, epistemic and linguistic borders. We draw on Dervin's (2017) critical and reflexive interculturality as a theoretical framework emphasizing the dynamic process of intercultural communication education and the need to renegotiate the meanings and connotations of the notion of interculturality. The theoretical framework of this paper also guided our project. In the proposed project, students were companions who discussed and negotiated their understandings of interculturality together. This is referred to as *The Companion Model* (see Figure 1) and followed this structure:

- The first step in the project was to enhance students' power discourse of interculturality. This was meant to encourage them to explore various sources of knowledge about the topic, both locally and internationally.
- The second step aimed to understand how students navigated and negotiated understandings of interculturality.
- The third step was to understand how students learnt from each other about interculturality after navigating and negotiating.

Based on the *Companion Model* of the virtual exchange, the project was designed on the basis of two rounds of exchanges. 48 students from different backgrounds, disciplines, and degrees participated in the project, which provided multifaceted understandings of the concept of culture in intercultural knowledge. The students met on 6 occasions:

- **Round (1)** four meetings between students from FU (13 students) and CU1 (15 students) (the duration of one meeting was between one hour and one hour and a half)
- **Round (2)** two meetings between all the students from Round 1 and students from CU2 (20 students). Students from FU and CU1 shared what they had learnt in round 1 with students from CU2, respectively (the duration of one meeting was between one hour and one hour and a half).

In the following analysis, we focus on the online meetings from Round 1 where students exchanged their understandings of three important but polysemic keywords, as chosen by the

TABLE 1 Detailed information about participating universities and students.

Participant universities	University type	Student number	Participating rounds arrangement	Course name integrated the online exchange
Finnish University	Multidisciplinary	13	Round 1 with CU1; Round 2 with CU2	Language learning (Chinese)
Chinese University 1	Multidisciplinary	15	Round 1 with FU; Round 2 with CU2	Intercultural communication
Chinese University 2	Chinese Minzu 'ethnic' disciplines	20	Round 2 with FU; Round 2 with CU1	Intercultural communication education and Minzu education

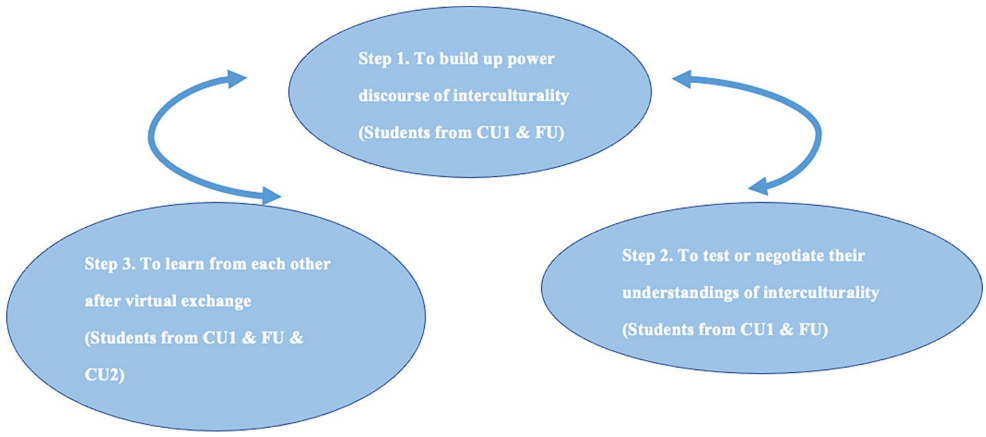

FIGURE 1
Companion model.

researchers: *Culture, Language* and *Interculturality*. Based on the discussion by the participating teachers, we designed a handout for students to guide them through the project. We organized an online meeting at the beginning of the project with all of the students to present the project and answer their questions. Before each meeting in Round 1, students were asked to reflect on a certain number of questions and to discuss them when they met. For each meeting a specific goal was set.

Based on the handout provided to students, the first meeting aimed to discuss the various meanings and usages of the term 'culture' in different languages and contexts. In the second meeting, the discussion continued with a particular focus on the Chinese term for culture, '文化' (wénhuà). Additionally, the second meeting also addressed issues related to misrepresentations of both international and domestic 'cultures'. While analyzing the data, we made use of group meetings as a source of information.

15 Chinese students and 13 Finnish students were involved in Round 1. They were assigned to 6 groups with 2–3 Chinese and 2–3 Finnish students. Each group scheduled their online meetings by themselves. The first two meetings were around the discussion of the core concept of *culture*. The other two meetings were around the two other core concepts of *language* and *interculturality*. Each meeting lasted around 1 h to 1.5 h. The online meetings were recorded and stored. Due to some technological recording issues, a total of 5 groups' 17-h online meetings were collected and transcribed. Students used English as their communication language mixed with some Chinese since the Finnish students were also Chinese language speakers of differing levels. The Chinese elements were translated and (re-) negotiated by the authors.

Due to the limited length of the article, the study focuses on Round 1, more specifically on the first two meetings around discussions about the core concept of culture, involving 3 groups of 6-h online meetings with 14 students in total, including 7 female Chinese students, 1 male Chinese student, 4 female Finnish students, and 2 male Finnish students. Among them, 1 female Finnish student was originally from Italy (see details in Table 2).

4 Data analysis and results

During the students' discussions about the concept of culture, two ideological orientations emerged: *nation-oriented* and *society-oriented*. Nation-oriented ideology refers to thoughts on nations while discussing the concept culture. Society-oriented refers to thoughts on social and societal issues. In the following sub-section, we first illustrate these ideological orientations and how students (re-) negotiate their discrepancies. We then look into how Chinese and Finnish students co-construct criticality within the nation-oriented ideology and society-oriented ideology, respectively. It is important to note that we are making a binary distinction between nation-oriented and society-oriented ideologies in what follows, solely for analytical purposes. This is intended to illustrate the different and differing ideological orientations that underlie individuals' interactions in relation to intercultural communication. However, this does not mean that individuals can be distinctly categorized by and within these two ideological orientations (Holliday, 2010).

4.1 Nation-oriented ideology vs. society-oriented ideology in relation to the concept of *culture*

During our data analysis, we observed that Chinese and Finnish appear to be thinking differently when discussing the same topics related to culture. This observation aligns with our understanding of ideologies in this study. Ideologies represent individuals' imaginary relations to 'conditions of existence' (Roucek, 1944; Althusser, 1971). It is important to note that our intention is not to categorize our participants into any labels but, for simple analytical purposes, we categorize them 'nationally' when discussing the data. Considering the critical perspective adopted in this paper, this might appear to be contradictory, see 'janusian' (Dervin, 2016). However, studies of interculturality often reveal that individuals navigate between positions of, e.g., stereotyping about their nationality and universalizing what they observe in self and others (e.g., Kao, 2023). For example, differing ideological orientations emerge when students

TABLE 2 Detailed information about the online meetings.

No.	Group	Core concept	Duration	Participants			Communicating language
				Pseudonyms	Gender	Nationality	
1	Group 2 Meeting 1 (G2M1)	Culture 1	1:05:00	Lin	M	Chinese	English
				Fei	F	Chinese	
				Apple	F	Finnish	
				Bella	F	Finnish	
2	G2M2	Culture 2	1 h	Lin	M	Chinese	English
				Fei	F	Chinese	
				Hui	F	Chinese	
				Apple	F	Finnish	
				Bella	F	Finnish	
3	G4M1	Culture 1	45:15 (audio)	Kai	F	Chinese	Chinese; English
				Xin	F	Chinese	
				Caterina	F	Italian based in Finland	
				David	M	Finnish	
4	G4M2	Culture 2	45:23 (audio)	The same participants in G4M1 above			Chinese; English
5	G5M1	Culture1	57:16	Hong	F	Chinese	Chinese; English
				Lan	F	Chinese	
				Eva	F	Finnish	
				Frank	M	Finnish	
6	G5M2	Culture 2	1:07:42	The same participants in G5M1 above			Chinese; English

initiate a discussion around the topic of discrimination (e.g., G4M2) and the phrase '改造落后文化' (translation: *to transform a backward culture*), which is often used in Chinese discourses of interculturality (e.g., G5M2, see Yuan et al., 2022). In the study in general, students based in Finland are more inclined to nation-oriented ideological positions while students from China are more apt to society-oriented discourses (e.g., the status of women).

In Excerpt 1, Finland-based student Caterina (originally from Italy) shares the kind of discrimination that she has experienced in Finland, when people would link her to the 'Italian mafia' – which she finds offensive. When she labels herself as a 'lucky immigrant', she also turns to the nation-oriented ideology, using analogical reasoning by comparing herself with girls from Turkey or Georgia since she looks like a 'Middle East girl' (Xu, 2022).

Excerpt 1 (from G4M2)[1]

> Caterina: I face discrimination sometimes during my travels but I will talk about racism here in Finland which surprises me because I think Finland is a very open country and welcoming country. But it's unrealistic to think that everyone is welcoming. It was nothing special like link me to the mafia or something like that. It sounds so stupid but it's like the way to offend as an Italian. […] I would say that as an Italian I'm very lucky because I look the same as a middle eastern girl, but because I'm from Italy everyone assumes that Italy is so beautiful and you have culture. And I if I were a Turk or I do not know Georgia they would be more racist against me. So I think I am a lucky immigrant.

This resonates with Finnish student David's nation-oriented ideology of discrimination. In Excerpt 2, following Caterina's discussion of the discrimination she faces in Finland, David introduces the same topic about Finns being discriminated by Swedes and Russians due to the historical relations between these countries. He maintains that 'upper-class people' in Sweden and Russia might have backwards views toward Finns, treating them as peasants.

Excerpt 2 (from G4M2)

> David: For me it's kind of weird, but Finland used to be an imperial subject of Sweden, after that of Russia. A lot of Swedes are so conservative and call you like a peasant. […]. It sounds weird but I think it's usually more of like the upper class in Sweden and Russia like who have those sort of backwards views.

Following these testimonies about discrimination in Finland, Chinese student Kai changes the focus of the conversation to talk about discrimination against women in China where 'many families did not want to have girls'. Kai's society-oriented ideology emerges

1 To ensure clarity, we explicitly identify the group and online meetings and the student(s) involved. For instance, Excerpt 1 is from Group 2 Meeting 1 (G2M1). The students' names are pseudonyms. We use parentheses () to add the English translation of Chinese and […] to indicate discussions not included in the analysis.

under the pressure of the nation-oriented ideology of discrimination by Finnish students David and Caterina. In Excerpt 3, during the process of inter-ideologicality, Caterina, confronted with Kai's different ideology of discrimination, dismantles her previous nation-oriented ideology by starting to see some 'unexpected discrimination.

Excerpt 3 (from G4M2)

> Kai: In the past I maybe think foreigners have yellow hair in Western countries. So I often think that you have a great hair color without having to dye it.
>
> David: You have never experienced anything like racism or discrimination?
>
> Caterina: But have you ever been like you're in China right now? You're in China?
>
> David: Yes, I think they are on campus.
>
> Caterina: 国吗?(Are you in China now?). Have you ever been abroad?
>
> David: Have you ever like traveled outside of China? Got on a vacation to like a or Korea, Japan.
>
> Kai: I'd like to talk about some discrimination in the past. Many families didn't want to have girls. They thought that girls would only waste money. And they just like boys. Now with the progress of the time. This phenomenon is much better and many families like to have girls and think girls are very considerate.
>
> Caterina: Oh! Inner discrimination of some sort is an unexpected form of discrimination.

A discrepant ideology also emerges in G5M2. Based on the discussion of '改造落后的文化' (*to transform a backward culture*), where Chinese student Hong mentions the former lower status of women in China, when people were more likely to be wanting boys than girls (see, excerpt 4). 'Westernization' occurs to Finnish student Frank's mind when he hears the phrase *transforming backward cultures* (see, excerpt 5). The nation-oriented ideology of 'westernization' for him refers to 'mak[ing] some country more European or American in the past'.

Excerpt 4 (from M5M2)

> Hong: I think it means to transform bad culture and maybe for example, *in the old days,* Chinese people think that women status was lower than men and they more liked boys. Maybe they [boys] can do more things than [girls] in an agricultural society. So this led to many bad things such as when a pregnant woman knew that she was pregnant with a girl, she would get angry. And nowadays we have transformed backward culture and we think that gender equality is very important. But a few of people still have that kind of bad culture so we need to transform a backward culture.

Excerpt 5 (from G5M2)

> Frank: I was thinking about the word westernization when I read this. It's like 西化in Chinese. So it's to make some country a more European or American sort of country and that's the point of doing that has been in the past. For example, African countries are not a civilized culture so that some people felt we have to go and put some European culture in there so that they are not a backward culture anymore. But nowadays people wouldn't do that anymore at least knowingly, that's not accepted anymore.

In the process of exchanging different thoughts about the same phrase 'transforming backward cultures', students critically think about the concept culture. Chinese and Finnish students use analogical reasoning by comparing backward cultures from the past and present (excerpts 4 & 5) (Xu, 2022). Cultures, for Hong, have been divided into 'bad' and 'good' cultures. Eva is critical of how to use the phrase in today's world. *Transforming backward cultures*, for her, refers to 'transforming old harmful thinking' (see excerpt 6).

Excerpt 6

> Hong: I think nowadays addressing that sentence that we should transform bad culture and keep new culture and at the meantime you should keep your traditions.
>
> Eva: That's a good interpretation of the word like how to use it nowadays. I think that's a good way to think about it just transform this kind of old harmful thinking.

4.2 Co-constructing criticality by analogical reasoning: smashing 'fanciful' thoughts

One of the ways of co-constructing criticality during the online discussions about the concept culture is analogical reasoning. As aforementioned, Analogical reasoning, is one of the critical methods employed by Wang Chong in his *Lunheng* (Xu, 2022), which focuses on comparing two elements so as to clarify and explain (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2024).

During our analysis, we noticed that students use analogical reasoning particularly when they compare situations in two countries. To be specific, Chinese students first share some 'fanciful' thoughts about Finland by getting information about the small Nordic country, a member of the European Union since the 1990s, through the media (e.g., news, social media). Second, Finnish students compare the 'fanciful' thoughts with their own personal experiences in Finland. In so doing, the Chinese students' 'fanciful' thoughts on Finland appear to be 'smashed'. During this process of nation-oriented inter-ideologicality, students seem to be able to bridge the gap between an imagined situation of a country and the real situation (Althusser, 1971; Xu, 2022). The following excerpts illustrate this process.

In Excerpt 7, Chinese students Lin and Fei share with Finnish students the argument that Finland has been the happiest country in

the world for 5 years in a row. They both claim to have found this piece of information online. For Lin,

Excerpt 7 (from G2M1)

> Lin: Finland is the country with a good overall level of development, great social government governance, and people live in peace and happiness.

Fei employs 'analogical reasoning' by comparing the differences of 'development' (i.e., 'economic development' in Chinese discourses), 'governance' and lifestyles in China and Finland (Xu, 2022). For Fei (Excerpt 8), Finland is an imagined dreamy 'developed' place where 'the pace of life is much slower than China'. Fei even compares Finland to a Chinese Utopia depicted in a poem titled *Tao Hua Yuan* (《桃花源记》, 376–397 CE) by the Chinese poet Tao Yuan Ming (陶渊明, 365–472 CE). Tao Hua Yuan is an imagined dreamy place where people are allured to move to.

Excerpt 8 (from G2M1)

> Fei: I learned that it is quite different from China in Finland. The pace of life is much slower than China in Finland. I think it seems like the Tao Hua Yuan (《桃花源记》) of Tao yuanming (陶渊明) who [was] a very famous poet. Tao Hua Yuan is the Chinese Utopia.

Comparing an imaginary representation of Finland by Chinese students with their own experience in Finland, Finnish students Anna and Bella critically point out that Finland as the happiest country is 'a common stereotype' (see, excerpts 9 & 10). Bella also compares two controversial stereotypes about Finland: the 'happiest country' and 'sad Finns'. Bella critically points out that the 'happiest' has to do mainly with 'economy factors' and 'social benefits'. The 'fanciful happiness' country imagined by Chinese students is smashed by Finnish students who reveal a form of capital benefit-driven happiness prevailing in the media.

Excerpt 9 (from G2M1)

> Anna: I was really like happily surprised about how different kind of news you had found. So I kind of thought that there wouldn't be anything at all because Finland is so small. So we don't have that much effect on the world around us, but I think these were quite like popular stereotypes, at least this happiness part.

Excerpt 10 (from G2M1)

> Bella: I think year after year Finns are quite surprised about this result because it's a common stereotype that Finnish people are like quite quiet, maybe like even sad because it's so dark here during winter time. So it's really surprising and has been for a while and it's actually a bit of a joke even at least in my circles and even in the media that it turns out like this. But I think it's really influenced by the economy factors and social benefits and things like that we enjoy through the Finnish state

This 'fanciful' thought on Finland as the 'happiest country' is also showed in Excerpt 11. Chinese student Hong shares that,

Excerpt 11 (from G5M2)

> Hong: I watched a video in which people in Finland have parties every day and 'they seem don't have much pressure about work and study and they are happy everyday'.

Eva employs analogical reasoning (Xu, 2022) by comparing Finland to China to show that there is less pressure in work and study in Finland. She seems to smash Hong's imagined impression of 'parties every day' in Finland by referring to herself as an example, saying that she does not like parties (Child, 2015).

Excerpt 12 (from G5M2)

> Eva: I think compared to China there's not so much pressure in Finland but we don't have parties every day but I think depends on the person. […] I don't like to party. I like to be at home and relax.

Frank also smashes the 'fanciful' thought of 'parties every day' introduced by the Chinese students by comparing his own personal experience as a president of a student organization in Finland. He uses four 'have to' in Excerpt 13 when he describes the 'happy party time'. The four 'have to' *going to parties* indicate both an obligation and a social benefit-driven ideology in Finland which compels Frank to believe 'what one ought to do' as a president of a student organization (Rourcek, 1994, p. 484). The social benefit-driven ideology could be imposed on Frank who feels obliged to attend parties due to his personal role in the student organization (Marques and Wikforss, 2020).

Excerpt 13 (from G5M2)

> Frank: I used to be a person like that but there's lots of parties coming up at the moment so I think I *have to* go there. Yeah, but it's not my own fault because I'm the president of my student organization. So I feel like I *have to* go there and I *have to* meet people and I *have to* hang out with them.

4.3 Co-constructing criticality by questioning and challenging: breaking down certainty assumptions

Questioning and challenging are the main ways of co-constructing criticality in the study. To question and challenge correspond to the ways one could break down one's or others' assumptions and certainties (Butler, 2002; McLeod, 2018). G2M1 demonstrates how Chinese and Finnish students question and challenge thoughts on society-oriented (e.g., women's status) ideology around the concept of culture. Excerpts 14 and 15 are from different times in G2M1. Excerpt 14 starts at 15 min of G2M1 and Excerpt 15 at 32 min. Chinese and Finnish students seem to have different (hidden) ideologies about the status of women in their respective societies. They keep questioning and challenging each other on this topic.

For example, in excerpt 14, Chinese student Fei puts forward one piece of news about Finland as the most women-work friendly country to share with others. Contributing to the society-oriented ideology, Finnish student Anna asks a question about women's working opportunities in China, trying to seek confirmation of an assumption about whether mothers always take care of the children at home in China. Her question connotes a hidden ideology that women's status is not as high in China compared to Finland. In front of this (hidden) ideology, Chinese student Lin first 'disproves' her assumption, maintaining that women are more independent in China today. However, he later 'admits' that there is still some degree of inequality in certain areas.

Excerpt 14 (from G2M1)

> Fei: And the last piece of news I read is that Finland is in the list of countries where women are most work friendly.
>
> Anna: I would like to *ask* about women's working opportunity's part *compared* to in China and Finland. Is the assumption correct that in China, it's usually the mother that takes care of the children at home or do you have childcare opportunities?
>
> Lin: Women become to be more independent and have the same status of men. But right now, in some aspects it is a little still have the inequality. But actually they do not always take care of children at home. They also go to work and study and have their own life, have their own business.
>
> Anna: Okay, thank you. That's really interesting to hear how things are changing.

Excerpt 15 illustrates how a Chinese student, Lin, questions and challenges the (hidden) ideology of the higher status of women in Finland than in China by Finnish student Anna. After what happened in excerpt 14, 15 min later, Finnish student Bella shares news about Chinese astronauts in space. At this moment, Lin asks whether Finnish media covered Chinese female astronauts in the space station, as he believes that women's contributions to astronautics are also noteworthy. Lin's question seems to demonstrate that he challenges the (hidden) ideology that women's status is higher in Finland than in China as hinted at by Finnish student Anna (see excerpt 14). In front of Lin's challenge, Anna and Bella are pushed to reflect on biased media coverage. They both evaluate the fact that the news did not mention the Chinese female astronauts in Finland (see 'weird' in Excerpt 15). This prompts Anna to consider what is 'being left unsaid'.

Excerpt 15 (from G2M1)

> Lin: I'm interested in whether Chinese female astronauts in the space station. They do so many experiments to the pupils, to see how physics works. And I'm interested in whether Finnish media covered it.
>
> Bella: I don't remember anything about that. There is just coverage that there are people in the Tiangong space not so much on the gender.
>
> Lin: Uh because I think it's meaningful
>
> Bella: It is and it's weird that it isn't mentioned here.
>
> Anna: I agree and truly nice to hear about it. Also, I think it's quite interesting to hear that *that is being left unsaid*, because the Finnish news often try to pay attention to how they talk about gender and keep it balanced so that the female perspective wouldn't be left behind. So that would be a good chance to bring it up more, or but they might have not like taken it. So it's interesting to hear that.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Our paper shows that students from different places, working online together for several months and experiencing a special form of international educational mobility, might think things differently. This, to some extent, corresponds to Mannheim and Wirth's (1936) understanding of ideology whereby people think 'otherwise' due to their different socio-economic-political backgrounds, as well as educational and personal experiences. Our study demonstrates that Chinese and Finnish students appeared to think differently when they discussed the same topic of culture in relation to intercultural communication (see, 4.1.1). When the students discussed the topic of discrimination (e.g., G4M2) and the 'Chinese' phrase '改造落后文化' (to transform a backward culture) (e.g., G5M2), which relates to a specific localized take on interculturality, students from Finland were more inclined to a nation-oriented perspective while students from China to a society-oriented one (e.g., the status of women).

These different ideological orientations could be due to the different socio-economic-political situations of the students. In other words, different ideologies represent different imaginary relations to students' 'conditions of existence' (Althusser, 1971). From a geopolitical perspective, Finland has had complicated and complex relations with neighboring countries (e.g., Sweden, Russia) in recent history. Finland is now a member of NATO and thus aligns with US political, economic and strategic perspectives, which also influences current Finnish-Chinese relations. As a member of the European Union, Finland, with about 5 million inhabitants, is one of the top destinations for refugees and economic migrants in this corner of the world. Finland labels herself as a welfare state society but it is also very much embedded in global neoliberalism/capitalism (Thrupp et al., 2023). Through strong nation branding since the early 2000s, the Nordic country has managed to build up a positive image of a 'happy', 'highly educated' nation worldwide. China, as a big country in the 'East', is far from this complicated geopolitical situation compared to Finland and yet she is affected by it too and has to take her own positions. In our study Chinese students may be more inclined to feel concerned with social and societal issues related to their own country because of current ideological and international clashes. As a huge 'developing' country, China is also currently trying to deal with her own inner 'economic' foes. Besides, the society-oriented (e.g., the status of women) ideology of Chinese students could be related to their own gender identities and interests in these issues. In our study, Chinese students from G4 and G5 were all female.

The study further illustrated the co-constructed criticality taking place between Chinese and Finnish students in the process of 'doing' inter-ideologicality within the nation-oriented and society-oriented ideologies. The findings revealed that when it came to the nation-oriented ideology (see, 4.1.2), Finnish students who had experienced

Finland first-hand challenged the 'fanciful' thoughts held by the Chinese students about Finland by using analytical reasoning (e.g., G2M1, G5M2) (Child, 2015; Xu, 2022). The controversy between what Chinese students had heard about Finland through various sources such as news and social media and Finnish students' first-hand experience, has led to the unveiling of the socio-economic factors that drive the idealized perceptions of a country *interculturally* (Althusser, 1971). In relation to the society-oriented ideology (see, 4.1.3), Chinese and Finnish students questioned and challenged each other about women's status in their respective countries to reveal specific thoughts on the status of women in each society (McLeod, 2018). During this process, they concluded that it was important to see 'what was being left unsaid' compared to what they had known in their own 'world' (G2M1) (Roucek, 1944; Foucault, 1997). Inter-ideologicality represents the process of helping 'push' each other to see one's own blind spots in one's own ideological world of interculturality as a notion (Dervin, 2022). In other words, inter-ideologicality corresponds to the important process of breaking down certain knowledge of an imagined country and societal phenomena in different contexts (Althusser, 1971; Butler, 2002; Jaeggi, 2009).

Our study goes beyond the discussion about what the core concepts (e.g., culture) mean to focus on the ideologies around the concepts. Epistemologically, the study advances research on intercultural communication education focusing on the impact of factors such as mass information, complex social situations, and personal identities and experiences intercultural communication. Our interest is not in making sure that students can communicate 'efficiently' or 'successfully' together but to urge them to listen to each other very carefully and to (re-) negotiate meanings and connotations of what they say about interculturality. This perspective is based on Dervin's work from 2020 onwards. The researcher urges scholars, educators and students to avoid looking for 'magical recipes' to interculturality, Instead, he advocates interrogating the way ideologies of interculturality (e.g., Holliday, 2010) influence the ways we have been made to think about the notion, while ignoring and even discarding perspectives from different corners of the world and languages (e.g., Dervin, 2023). To some extent, this study demonstrates that the realities of intercultural communication are always involved in ideological (big and small) conflicts in the un−/spoken of what we say.

Pedagogically, and based on our findings, we suggest that educators find ways of stimulating students' own criticality by introducing them to analogical reasoning, questioning and challenging in order to become aware of their own ideological cocooning and drilling, whereby they might assume 'things' in a certain way (Dervin, 2023; McLeod, 2018; Xu, 2022). Educators are also recommended to challenge their own certainties on intercultural knowledge by looking at themselves critically and reflexively in the mirror of what others say about interculturality (Butler, 2002; see Dervin, 2023). At the same time, they should aim to encourage their students to do so as often as possible. Online international mobility like the project described in this paper offers a lot of potentials in a world where traveling to other parts of the world might become more and more difficult because of political, economic and environmental concerns. Our study placed together students located in two (very) different geo-economic-political contexts, which are embedded in current multifaceted conflicts, potentially putting them at odds. Reflecting on what interculturality could mean and entail together over a short and/or long period of time could help individuals move beyond some of the current clashes performed in, e.g., today's (social) media.

Conflicts in intercultural communication could be caused by different ideological orientations. Being aware of these orientations, which could be caused by individuals' political, social, and economic backgrounds as well as their personal experiences, might help us understand why some people think differently from us and to renegotiate our thoughts about different aspects of interculturality. While conflicts are difficult to avoid entirely, we aspire to see fewer conflicts in the world.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because our faculty at Helsinki (educational sciences) waives ethics clearance (as long as we follow the guidelines of the Finnish Ethic Bureau) for any activity considered as action research aimed at improving teacher education. This was the case of this study. Students were informed that they could refuse that we use their data for the paper and that they could ask us to remove them at any moment (which did not occur). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

JP: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. FD: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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