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Learning through the dialogical self in intercultural encounters: A case study of Chinese-Finnish virtual exchanges in higher education

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Abstract

This article explores the benefits of international online platforms in fostering intercultural learning within higher education. Reflexive writing, a core component of virtual exchange, helps students develop the self-awareness and empathy essential for engaging in interculturality. Data were gathered from students (*N* = 39) at two universities (one in China and one in Finland) who participated in a month-long online course. As part of their collaborative tasks, students were prompted to reflect on their experiences and feelings about interacting with one another. The analysis, guided by Hermans's interdisciplinary, realistic and fluid Dialogical Self Theory (DST), examined how students made sense of their encounters and negotiated situations they deemed significant. The findings reveal that students often used internal dialogue between different personal positions to advance their intercultural learning, although this was not unanimous amongst them. The study also highlights the importance of well-designed prompts for intercultural learning, showing how self-reflection could enhance students' intercultural self-awareness and empathy.

Abstract in Finnish

Tämä artikkeli tutkii kansainvälisten verkkoalustojen hyötyjä kultuurienvälisen oppimisen mahdollistajana osana korkeakouluopetusta. Verkkovaihtojen keskeisenä osana toimiva refleksiivinen kirjoittaminen auttaa opiskelijoita

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kehittämään itsetuntemusta sekä empatiaa, mitkä ovat välttämättömiä kulttuurienvälisyydelle. Tutkimusdata kerättiin kahden yliopiston (yksi Kiinassa ja toinen Suomessa) opiskelijoilta (*N* = 39), jotka osallistuivat kuukauden mittaiselle verkkokurssille. Osana heidän kurssitehtäviään, opiskelijoita ohjeistettiin reflektoimaan yhteistyön luomia kokemuksia ja tunteita. Hermansin monitieteisen, realistisen ja muovautuvan dialogisen minäteorian (DST) pohjalta tehdyssä analyysissä tarkasteltiin, miten opiskelijat tulkitsivat kohtaamisiaan ja neuvottelivat tilanteita, joita he pitivät merkittävänä. Tulokset paljastavat, että opiskelijat hyödynsivät sisäistä dialogia eri henkilökohtaisten positioiden välillä edistääkseen kulttuurienvälistä oppimistaan, mutta tämä ei ollut aina yhtenäistä opiskelijoiden välillä. Tutkimus korostaa hyvin suunnitellun ohjeistuksen roolia osana kulttuurienvälistä oppimista ja osoittaa, kuinka itsereflektio voi parantaa opiskelijoiden kulttuurienvälistä itsetuntemusta ja empatiaa.

Keywords

Dialogical self theory; identity development; identity negotiation; intercultural learning; interculturality; reflection; virtual exchanges

1. Introduction

Dialogue does not end at the moment of goodbyes. As a vital part of learning, dialogue continues well after people part ways, often occurring internally in the shower, on a walk or while writing a diary (Ligorio, 2010; Monereo et al., 2021). These moments of inner dialogue and reflection are crucial for interculturality in international settings, providing the space to learn, develop empathy for others and ourselves, consider alternative perspectives and reflect on how perceptions and ideologies shape our own positions (Dervin, 2023; Jackson, 2011; Ligorio, 2010; Moate, 2023).

University studies provide learners with opportunities to meet people from diverse ethnic, linguistic, religious and other backgrounds, making universities a potent setting for intercultural learning. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022), online synchronous meeting tools have become integral to higher education (Hackett et al., 2023; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022). Virtual exchanges, where students participate in an online 'exchange', represent one way through which universities can utilize digital spaces for this purpose (Choi & Choi, 2020; O'Dowd, 2021).

We note that, while virtual exchanges are well-established in e.g., language and intercultural education, their application within teacher preparation programs and/or education studies remains a significant gap in the literature (Peng & Dervin, 2022). This is a critical area for development as scholars in education sciences increasingly recognize the necessity of working on future educators' engagement with interculturality (Dervin, 2024; Hagenaars

et al., 2025). In our globally connected classrooms, teachers must be equipped to navigate interculturality and support *all* learners to do so. Therefore, understanding how virtual exchanges could be strategically utilized within e.g., teacher education is an imperative, ensuring graduates enter the profession with the empathy, self-awareness and relational skills for equitable and inclusive teaching.

Identity construction and how intercultural encounters influence our sense of self have long been central to interculturality research and intercultural learning (Dervin & Risager, 2014; Finke & Sökefeld, 2018; Holliday, 2010; Kadianaki et al., 2014). One way to examine identity construction in this context is by analysing internal dialogues in the form of reflections (Jones, 1997). In this paper, we argue that these reflections can provide a window into our inner realities and meaning-making during the intercultural learning process. To understand how students engage in internal dialogue and how this influences their learning, this paper applies the Dialogical Self Theory by Hubert Hermans (Hermans, 2001, 2003, 2012; Hermans et al., 1992; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), an influential, interdisciplinary approach that is realistic, sophisticated yet fluid. We maintain that the internal dialogues students engage in can help them reflect on their encounters, develop empathy and participate in intercultural learning. This paper focuses on how students negotiate their identities in reflexive writing when interacting with students from another country. Through the analysis of reflexive pieces written by students located in China and Finland, our study examines how virtual exchanges could influence students' intercultural learning and how the dialogical self can support them in these complex processes.

2. Reflection in developing empathy and self-awareness for intercultural learning

As stated earlier, universities have a significant role in students' social and psychological development, providing opportunities for learning through self-reflection (Leijen et al., 2018). While intercultural learning has previously been considered a result of educational practices that prepare students for intercultural encounters through e.g., strategies, tools and tips, these practices are being increasingly challenged by, for example, non-essentialist, less pragmatic and more critical-reflexive scholars and educators (Dervin, 2023; Dervin & Jackson, 2018; Ferri, 2023; Hoult, 2020; Jackson, 2009). For this study, intercultural learning refers to students' increased self-awareness and empathy through reflection (Busse & Krause, 2015; Dervin, 2023; Jackson, 2009; T. Jin, 2017; Schellhammer, 2018a; Sternecker, 2012).

First, reflection refers to students' ability to think "through something and not just taking it at face value" (Jarvis, 2021, p. e1). This involves reflecting on one's own biases and contextual factors like power dynamics that shape interactions, which are crucial for intercultural learning (Aman, 2015; Dervin, 2025; Dervin & Jackson, 2018). Second, increased self-awareness here denotes the ability to recognize how one's own assumptions, opinions and perceived norms influence interactions with others; and then to reflect on these to engage without letting them dominate, instead actively listening and forming opinions after the exchange (Jackson, 2011; Moate, 2023).

Furthermore, empathy development implies students' capacity to see a topic from different viewpoints, connect situational, economic-political and historical factors to behaviours and develop an openness to accept different ways of being without negative judgment (Álvarez & Qian, 2013). According to Sternecker (2012, p. 45) empathy is essential, as without it, students' "perception remains constrained by one's own context, limiting the capacity of the learner for change in attitudes and behaviour". Learning situations can challenge us, making change a normal part of the experience and the openness nurtured by empathy enables this change through dialogue.

Furthermore, research on interculturality has demonstrated that reflection is an important part of intercultural learning (Dervin, 2023; Jackson, 2009; Kokkonen et al., 2022). Different reflexive exercises, from interviews to written diaries, have long been part of broader intercultural communication, education and learning research (Álvarez & Qian, 2013; Formenti & Jorio, 2019; Jackson, 2009; Wang, 2013). In this context, reflection refers to one's ability to 'relativize' one's own frame of reference, acquire a more relative view on diversity, adapt to different environments and communication styles, display flexibility and empathize with others (Busse & Krause, 2015, p. 426). Reflection helps us understand our own thoughts and review our patterns whilst considering others' perspectives, which can then help individuals negotiate new learnings (Moate, 2023).

While reflexive exercises in education are accepted as beneficial for intercultural learning, their effectiveness is occasionally questioned based on a somewhat 'superficial' nature (Moate, 2023, p. 2; Chen, 2025). This superficiality often results from the compulsory nature of the task, unclear prompts, students' lack of required knowledge or an uncomfortable interview setting, leading to performative reflections (Jackson, 2009; R. Jones, 1997; Kokkonen et al., 2022; Moate, 2023; Moreno Bruna & Goethals, 2023). For these exercises to work, they must balance sufficient instruction without limiting student thought or turning reflections into performative writing for the teacher (Moate, 2023). Furthermore, the occasionally performative nature is criticized as evaluating

any change from written or spoken reflections in educational settings can be difficult (Blasco, 2012). To indicate increased empathy or self-awareness, exercises should focus inward on personal influences, allowing students to explore why they act or think a certain way (Blasco, 2012, p. 484). For this study, increased self-awareness and empathy present themselves in internal dialogue between positions and in the creation of new positions that negotiate internal conflict.

Exchange periods abroad have been traditionally viewed as platforms for intercultural learning by bringing together individuals from different countries and backgrounds (O'Dowd, 2021). Whereas exchange programmes are perceived as positive initiatives for internationalisation, their impact on intercultural learning has also been questioned (Hoult, 2020; Jones et al., 2012). Many exchanges have been criticized for treating the other as an object of learning (O'Dowd, 2021). They have also been critiqued for a sole focus on Global North and English-speaking contexts, and for a lack of intentionality, providing an opportunity to meet students from abroad without requiring reflection to foster learning (Choi & Choi, 2020; Jackson, 2013; O'Dowd, 2021; Dervin, 2024). Busse and Krause (2015) found that instead of focusing on observing the other, intercultural learning could benefit from problem-based learning, where a mixed group concentrates on a common task.

In recent years, exchanges have increasingly moved online to provide new opportunities for interaction (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016; Peng & Dervin, 2022). Virtual exchanges have been predominantly applied for language learning but since the COVID-19 pandemic, various other fields have implemented them, from politics to education (Álvarez & Qian, 2013; Case et al., 2022; Esau & Friess, 2022; Hackett et al., 2023; Kokkonen et al., 2022; Peng & Dervin, 2022). Virtual exchanges seem to represent a good way to bring students from various schools together. However, just fostering interactions is not enough to ensure intercultural learning (Choi & Choi, 2020; O'Dowd, 2021).

Many interculturalists have argued that intercultural learning should occur during online exchanges, with the focus shifting inwards to the self, considering how students reflect, negotiate and renegotiate their identity during encounters (Dervin, 2015; Finke & Sökefeld, 2018; Holliday, 2010). When structured well, these intercultural learning opportunities can support students to actively 'do' interculturality; negotiate between different internal voices, seek balance in the moments in-between and engage in the continuous process of co-construction and renegotiation of their identities when meeting others (Peng & Dervin, 2022, p. 2).

3. Dialogical self theory

An important part of intercultural communication and learning is fostering different forms of dialogue, both with others and within the self (Mesker et al., 2018; Xu, 2013). As aforementioned, the self is in constant motion, a complex puzzle of different identities negotiated and re-negotiated across situations (Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Dervin & Jackson, 2018). Within this plurality, it is the interrelations and movements between these identities that create meaning and support learning (Dantas de Paula & Branco, 2021). According to Ligorio (2010), learning can impact our identity by challenging what we know, thus facilitating dialogue between different positions within the self. These positions refer to the various identities individuals inhabit such as professional, personal and group identities (e.g., I as a teacher, I as a student, I as a citizen of my country) (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). To make sense of the world, these positions become voices in our minds that engage in internal dialogue during, for example, conversations with oneself or diary writing (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Building on Dervin's extensive use of dialogism in his research on intercultural communication education (e.g., Dervin, 2008), this study applies Hermans' influential, interdisciplinary Dialogical Self Theory (DST) to understand how internal dialogues influence intercultural learning (Hermans, 2001, 2003, 2012; Hermans et al., 1992; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). DST has been used comprehensively by researchers across disciplines for over 20 years. We maintain that this dialogical process and the construction of a dialogical self can lead to learning through dialogue and negotiation between internal identities, creating intercultural understanding and new meanings (Monereo & Hermans, 2023; Dervin, 2016). DST is thus used as the theoretical framework for this study.

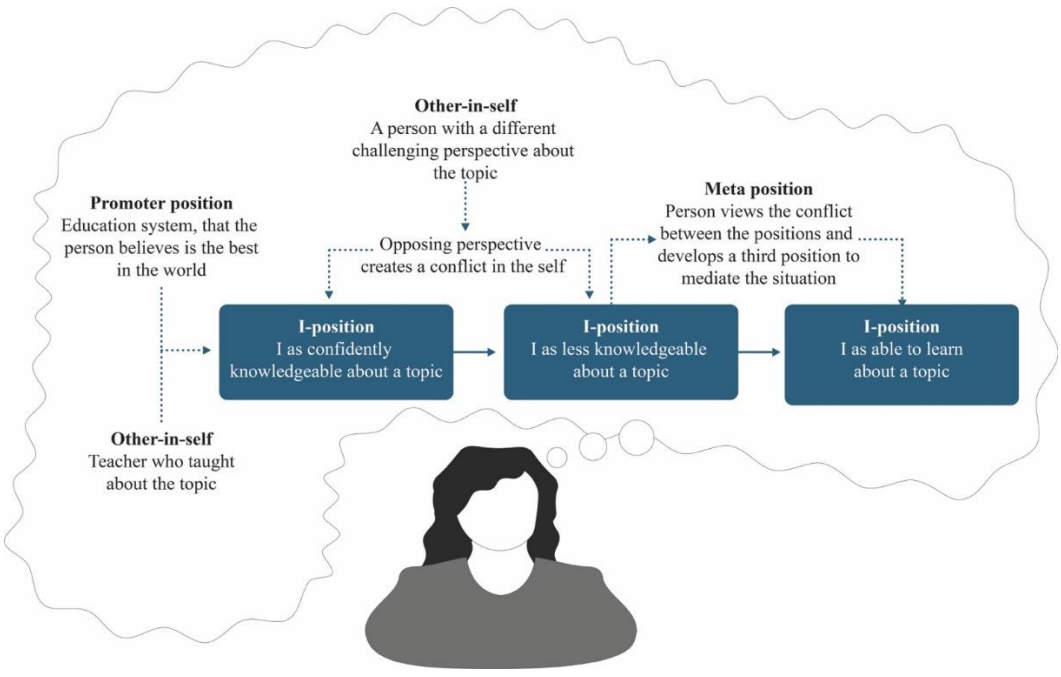
Hermans' theory (Hermans, 2001; 2003; 2010; 2012) has been applied to various fields from psychology to education. In education, it has been connected to research in intercultural, multicultural and global educational settings (Badia et al., 2020; Jarvis, 2021; Dervin, 2015; Leijen et al., 2018; Ligorio & Pugliese, 2004; Chen, 2025). DST's consideration of the self as inseparable from contexts such as communities, histories, power dynamics and temporal factors makes it suitable for analysing intercultural learning (Hermans et al., 1992; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). This situational and contextual understanding of the plurality of identities and their shifts aligns with our understanding in this paper. As such, we argue that each individual embodies multiple identities (some imagined, some hidden) that are contextually constructed, negotiated, and re-negotiated in social situations through contact and dialogue (Dervin, 2023).

Social situations and interactions with others influence the construction and use of the dialogical self. According to Gieser and Hermans (2011, p. 2) "the

I emerges from its intrinsic contact with the (social) environment and is bound to particular positions in time and space." A dialogical self is constructed when different identity positions engage in internal dialogue (Gieser & Hermans, 2011; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). According to Hermans (2001; 2012), each individual has multiple personal I-positions, such as I as a teacher or I as a student and often also various collective positions, such as we as a study group or we as a country. These positions are further influenced by the internalized voices of others, others-in-self, such as the voices of parents, friends, or children (Hermans, 2012). These others-in-self can influence personal positions in various ways; for example, a person might position themselves as 'stupid' because a former teacher described them as such. Other influential positions in this 'society of the mind' include promoter positions that reflect the views of groups or influential figures (Hermans, 2012, p.19). A promoter position can present itself, for example, as We as the best country, where national pride informs the position. Other promoter positions can be religious leaders, politicians, or systems of power that inform our sense of self (e.g., I as a sinner, informed by religion as a promoter) (Hermans, 2012). An example of the relationships between positions and how they negotiate in dialogue can be seen in Figure (1).

FIGURE (1)

EXAMPLE OF INTERNAL DIALOGUE WHEN AN I-POSITION IS MET WITH A CONFLICTING OTHER-IN-SELF



The different positions do not exist separate from each other. Instead, they coexist within the self, which is why "the individual is involved in an active process of positioning in which co-operations and competitions between

positions develop in a particular situation" (Hermans, 2001, p. 253). It is common for the different positions to represent opposing views and perspectives, leading to the need for dialogue, negotiation and potential resolving of internal conflicts (Hermans, 2001; NB: This negotiation process between opposing positions can be seen in Figure 1). In today's connected societies and situations such as intercultural encounters, these internal conflicts between opposing positions are accelerating within the self, as people are exposed to new perspectives (Hermans, 2012; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Dervin, 2025). These moments of internal conflict between positions can cause feelings of uncertainty as new positions and outside voices enter the internal dialogue but they can also act as opportunities for learning when the conflicts are solved through dialogue and negotiation between positions (Hermans & Bartels, 2020; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Mesker et al., 2018). According to Ligorio (Ligorio, 2013, p. xvi) "the self is involved in a constant process of change and innovation, continuously striving for a balance between various tensions within the I-positions". This balance is achieved with different strategies: A person can create space between the conflicting positions through the use of an observant *meta-position* that helps them reflect on the dialogue and find balance; they can construct a new position to mediate the conflict known as a *third position*; or they can revoke the challenging positions by "conforming to a powerful external position", relaying on a powerful external *promoter position;* or by "sharpening the boundaries between self and other" (Hermans, 2012, p. 15; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

Intercultural learning urges people to develop empathy and self-awareness through reflection. To achieve self-awareness and empathy, people need the space to reflect on their interaction by taking a step back and viewing the situations through a reflective *meta-position.* Adopting "a meta-positional attitude allows us to take sufficient distance to evaluate ourselves in different versions of ourselves and to analyse the impact of each voices on our internal organization" (Monereo et al., 2021, p.3). As Schellhammer (2018a, p.14) explains, this space affords individuals an opportunity to "engag[e] in a dialogue that opens the door to a new understanding of the other—and of myself or, rather, my selves. Dialogue is the means for development, and bridges the inner and the outer world". By engaging in internal dialogue through dialogical self, individuals are able to reflect on their experiences, develop empathy and self-awareness required for intercultural learning.

4. Applying dialogical self theory to intercultural learning

For Monereo et al. (2021, p. 2), "The interpersonal sphere is often the trigger and consequence of dialogical interchange, but we experiment, learn, and decide in our intrapersonal sphere". The Dialogical Self Theory (DST) allows for increased understanding and analysis of how meanings are constructed in the in-between states of our identity, where different positions engage in dialogue (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Ligorio, 2010; Monereo & Hermans, 2023; see Figure (1) for an illustration too).

Whilst the DST has been applied to various fields to understand how identities of individuals are constructed, there are limited applications in intercultural learning research (exceptions are found in Dervin's work and his collaborators, e.g., Dervin & Tan, 2022; Chen, 2025; Simpson, 2024; on virtual exchanges, see Peng & Dervin, 2022). As Ligorio (2010, pp. 103-104) states "[Dialogical Self Theory] provides a good lens for observing identity changes and allows us to analyse evidence of the relationship between learning and identity". In this paper, we assert that applying the principles of DST to intercultural learning research can provide valuable new understanding of how students construct their identities as part of intercultural learning, and more specifically here, in online exchanges (Dervin, 2016). Additionally, this analysis could provide valuable insights into how the construction and use of dialogical self could support intercultural learning initiatives in higher education. However, we are aware of challenges in applying DST to interculturality in study abroad, which might include the inherent complexity of the theory, making its operationalisation for empirical research methodologically demanding, potentially leading to inconsistent and/or superficial analyses of participants' internal dialogues.

To understand the benefits of dialogical self theory in intercultural learning and to counter some of the aforementioned critiques, this study analyses how students' construct a dialogical self in their reflections, how they negotiate and renegotiate positions in the self and how the use of dialogical self seems to support their intercultural learning in form of increased empathy and self-awareness. The following research questions are set for the study:

1. What personal I- and we- positions do the students use in their reflections?
2. For what purposes do the students use these different positions? What do they reveal about their intercultural thinking?
3. What factors seem to influence the use and construction of the dialogical self in their online intercultural encounters and learning?

4. In line with the second author and colleagues' previous research on interculturality and dialogism, how is DST a helpful framework for researching intercultural learning?

5. Materials and methods

5.1. Participants and data description

The data for the study was collected from 71 Master's students studying in China (n = 44) and in Finland (n = 27; not all Finnish nationals) in the broad field of educational sciences. The students all partook in a month-long virtual exchange organized by second and third authors together with a colleague from China, with a focus on non-state actors in education and Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education. This exchange was a compulsory part of courses on intercultural (teacher) education organized in the two contexts. We note that the exchange was not part of the assessment of these courses. It is also important to say that participation in this compulsory course was considered consent for the study, though students retained the right to withdraw at any time without 'penalty'. The research strictly adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) and our partner university in China for e.g., data collection, storage, anonymisation and analysis.

First the students had one online lecture together, after which they were divided into groups that met online to discuss the topic of the course. The goal of the virtual exchange was to provide students with an opportunity to engage in intercultural dialogue with their academic peers but also to encourage the students to critically view international non-state teaching initiatives such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The students were divided into 17 groups, and each group was required to organize a 1-1.5-hour meeting online to discuss the themes of the course in English. We note that English was a second language for most of the participants, with, at times, differing levels (B1 to C2 on the scale of the European Framework for Languages) and varieties of English, which would have influenced e.g., group work and comprehension (see Mu et al., 2023). Each individual student was asked by their teachers to provide a 200-word reflective assignment after their first meeting with their group. The reflections were written (by the second author) in response to the following instructions: Each student writes a 200-word reflexive piece on the experience of working together and on the discussions during the session (what was surprising? Did they disagree about the discussions? What did they learn?).

We note here that the students' reflective texts were submitted in English as this was the mandatory language of instruction for the online exchange and the courses in their respective institutions. While we acknowledge the possibility that students used translation tools to compose their texts, this study did not investigate their specific writing processes. We accept that the use of English may have also influenced linguistic features, such as pronoun choice. However, given that our analysis focuses on a single, context-specific instance of dialogical thinking rather than seeking generalisable or replicable findings, we consider the data suitable for exploring the nuanced and fluid processes of internal dialogue and position-taking in relation to interculturality (Kadianaki et al., 2014).

Out of the 17 groups, 10 met our inclusion criteria, which required at least one student from both universities to have submitted their reflective piece and consented to the research. After seven groups were excluded, 39 reflections were analysed (studying in Finland n = 12, studying in China n = 27). In the findings, different participants' reflections are referenced with 'SIC' preceding the reflections of students studying in China and 'SIF' preceding the reflections of students studying in Finland. All reflections are quoted verbatim in the following sections, with potential typographical errors corrected. If grammatical errors needed corrections these corrections are written within square brackets to indicate the corrections from the authors. All references to specific students and genders have been replaced by non-gendered pronouns to ensure the participants' anonymity. Additionally, to further anonymize the participants, the numeric identifier of each reflection is a randomized number between one and 39 (see Table 1). The randomized numbers are not according to group membership to ensure that the students could not be clearly distinguished.

TABLE (1)
EXAMPLE OF THE STUDENT ANONYMIZATION PROCESS

Group 1	Country of study	Original number	Randomized number	Code
Student name	China	1	33	SIC33
Student name	Finland	2	15	SIF15
Student name	Finland	3	5	SIF5
Student name	China	4	20	SIC20

5.2. Data analysis

First it is important for us to say that the use of a single reflection from the students inevitably limits the breadth and depth of our analysis. Consequently, this study does not seek to document student 'intercultural growth' or changes

in learning, as these would require longitudinal observation. Instead, our focus is on capturing the students' intercultural thinking and the internal dialogues present at that specific moment, rather than on proving intercultural development.

Relational (content) analysis was used to analyse the students' written reflections (e.g., Carley, 1993; Wilson, 2011). This method extends beyond conceptual content analysis by examining the relationships between identified themes and concepts. It allows the researcher to analyse why themes emerge, evolve and generate new meanings within the data (Carley, 1993; Wilson, 2011). In this context, analysing the relations and influences between shifts in positions helped determine whether students utilized a dialogical self in their reflections (Hermans, 2003). The data analysis was structured in a repeatable manner to ensure validity.

The coding of the data was a collaborative effort. We began by independently coding a subset of reflections using the predefined DST framework discussed below. Codes that did not initially match were then crosschecked in dedicated sessions. For instance, when one researcher coded e.g., "I felt like a representative of my country" as a collective position ('we as Finns') and another as a personal position ('I as a representative'), we revisited the DST theory to refine our understanding and ensure a consistent application for all subsequent data.

The analysis was managed using *Numbers* (Apple Inc, 2023) for smooth data handling. The process began with a close reading of the reflections to identify the different positions students adopted. A predefined 'codebook', based on Hermans' DST, guided the initial coding. The primary code categories were:

- I-positions (e.g., I as a learner)
- Collective positions (e.g., we as a group)
- Others-in-self (internalized voices of others)
- Promoter positions (influential figures or systems)
- Meta-positions (a position observing other positions).

The initial coding involved identifying all relevant pronouns (e.g., 'I', 'we', 'them') and references to others (e.g., 'other group', 'the people') and categorizing them according to this framework.

Following the initial coding, the materials were reviewed by the authors again to focus on the relations between position shifts – a key aspect of relational analysis. Each time a student moved from one position to another, the reasoning was analysed to determine if the shift occurred through internal dialogue or appeared random. This process is illustrated using an excerpt from student

SIF25's reflection: "Despite the language barrier, we were able to communicate effectively using visuals and texts which reinforced comprehension and allowed the discussion to move forward." In the initial coding, this excerpt was coded for the collective position we as a new group (evident in "we were able to communicate"). However, the second, relational review identified two more significant elements: A promoter position (language barrier as a challenge) and the emergence of a new position, we as improved learners. This new position is signalled by the word 'despite', which implies a developmental shift and the negotiation of a third position after overcoming the initial obstacle. This second review round was crucial for distinguishing moments of what could be labelled as 'genuine' (yet potentially temporary) internal dialogue from mere descriptions of events.

6. Results

It is important to note here that, in the following analysis, we consciously avoided categorising sub-positions based on student nationalities to circumvent an essentialist perspective (Holliday, 2010), which is a critical stance in contemporary intercultural studies. Furthermore, we remind the reader that not all participants from the Finnish university were Finnish nationals, reinforcing our decision to focus on individual positioning rather than 'national identity'.

The findings of this study are constructed from the aforementioned 39 reflections. Based on our analysis, most students utilized different personal (I- or we-) positions during their reflections. There were multiple sub-positions identified for these categories, such as I as a learner, I as a teacher, we as incompetent, we as a country and others (See Table 2). Only a few students (n = 4) remained relatively impersonal in their reflective pieces, either reporting the content of the meeting or what the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 contained. The number of coded positions identified for each student varied from four to 40. Some of these students bounced from one position to another with limited dialogue between their positions, but some actively utilized a dialogical self in their reflection process. This is further explained in the following sections. Most often, the students with a high number of positions utilized the observant *meta-position* to reflect on their internal dialogue and resolve internal conflicts between different positions. Most students (n = 20) encountered some level of internal conflict or challenge during their reflection. They seemed to resolve through negotiation between positions that in some cases resulted in the construction of a new *third position*.

For many students the virtual exchange sparked a temporary exploration of self through dialogue, where dialogue was used to better understand the

encounters they experienced. For some students the positioning and repositioning process in the dialogical self resulted in heightened empathy towards the others and in increased awareness of the self. Examples of this process are discussed in the following sections.

TABLE (2)
NUMBER OF SUB-POSITIONS IDENTIFIED FOR EACH MAIN CATEGORY

Personal I-positions	Collective We-positions	Others in the self	Meta position	Third position	Promoter position
16	16	12	1	11	12

6.1. Movements between positions

Identity occurs in rapid motion, whereby movement is influenced by temporary positions constantly shifting from one another as a result of internal and external influences (Hermans, 2003). The students' reflections show how the discussed situation influenced their positioning process. In some cases, the positioning and repositioning processes appeared unprovoked and almost random, but on most occasions, the student encountered a new situation, an inner conflict, or challenge where different positions dialogically negotiated balance in the self. These positioning and repositioning movements were often linked to the students' need to find a balance between the positions (Hermans & Bartels, 2020; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). The motivations for the movements in the students' reflections can be divided into two categories: movement through dialogue and movements in a monologue. These categories, and how the students construct new positions will be further discussed in the following sections.

6.1.1. Movements through dialogue

Through internal dialogue, the self aims to find a balance between varied identity positions by constructing new positions, utilising a meta-position to reflect on the situation and creating new meanings or by returning to existing important identities (Hermans, 2003; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Moate, 2023; Schellhammer, 2018b). The students utilized inner dialogue and dialogical self in different ways during their reflections. For many students the repositioning process occurred in temporary moments when something challenging or different occurred. An example of this is student SIC37 who reflects on their experience:

> To my surprise, we are facing similar challenges even though we come from different countries. The quality of education depends on geographical location, such as the gap between urban and rural schools, the gap caused by resource bias and the gap caused by regional economic conditions. (Excerpt 1 - Student SIC37)

Here the student shifts from *I as surprised* to *I as a critical thinker* through dialogue. The *I as surprised* position implies that the student had preconceived notions or expectations about the others and their countries, that the communication situation challenged. The perceived similarity, 'we are facing similar challenges' (Excerpt 1), with the others empowers the student to reposition themselves from *I as surprised* to a new position of *I as a critical thinker,* utilising a meta-position to consider the systematic situations influencing education. These short moments of movement were common in many reflections, highlighting the contextual nature of interculturality, with situations systematically being circumstantial and relational, and often temporary (Dervin, 2023; Chen, 2025).

Another common issue perceived by the students was the communication difficulties during the encounters. Communication difficulties could be thus considered as a promoter position for many reflections, as they greatly influenced the students' perceptions of themselves and others (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). An example of this type of movement could be observed with student SIF32, who wrote:

> [Other student from Finland] wasn't able to be there for the meeting, but I don't blame her at all. I will send her the recording so she can also learn something from the Chinese students. Most of the times it was really difficult to understand the students because their English isn't that good, but I understood what I had to, and they really tried their best. So, the experience taught me to be more tolerable and understanding.
>
> As I said before, I also learned a bit more about the educational situation in China. Back in [my country] I had a course about comparing different kinds of education around the world. So, I knew already some things like the exams being important and difficult as well the fact that education in the rural parts of China are slim and under financed. What I learned was that they also find the SDG4 goals important, and that policy is made for it. Some other things are that they find lifelong learning and (international) cooperation also important. (Excerpt 2 - Student SIF32)

The student first positions themselves as helpful towards the other teammates and later develops a new third position, *I as an empathetic learner,* when discussing communication difficulties. This shift occurs due to an inner conflict with the positive self image, *I as helpful*, after criticising the others' skills. Once the other is then perceived as kind, the inner conflict results in reflection and development of this new emphatic and understanding learner position. Once the student resolves the conflict, they move to a less engaged meta-position, where whilst mentioning that they 'learned a bit' (Excerpt 2) they focus predominantly on listing what they knew about the others prior to the learning

experience. Here the use of a less engaged meta-position can be seen less as a position of reflection and more as unengaged reporting of what happened between the students. In this section of the reflection the student positions themselves above the others and emphasizes the issues in the other country. This student's reflection shows how they use the dialogical self to construct a new empathetic identity to regain some kind of inner balance (Ligorio, 2010; Kokkonen et al., 2022). The construction of this new position can partially be seen as a performative aim to reposition themselves as good after critiquing others, but it can also be seen as a genuine development of increased empathy (Dervin, 2025; Jarvis, 2021).

Finally, some students utilized dialogical self to reflect and gain better understanding of themselves after an inner challenge occurred (Kadianaki et al., 2014). This can be seen with student SIC10 who seems able to connect their inner experience to a larger systematic level to gain understanding of their experience:

> [I] was disappointed at my English ability and the Global education development. We have received English education for many years, but these English abilities can‘t guarantee our communication with foreigners well. We only learn English for examination. Therefore, in the course of meetings, we often can‘t express ourselves to foreigners well, and can‘t understand foreigners well. In the process of investigation and research, we also feel the views and support of countries around the world on education, because their development goals, political systems, policies and other reasons are very different, which also leads us to be unable to realize SDG4 for a period of time. (Excerpt 3 - Student SIC10)

The student utilizes a meta-position to reflect on their feelings of inadequacy due to their English language skills. In their reflection the student occupies many positions to make sense of their experience of disappointment. The student embodies both the group position with the other group members but also a *we as a country* position upon reflecting on the education they have received that is now influencing their experience. After slightly criticising their country, they seek balance by reflecting on the wider systemic level (Simpson, 2024). As such they wonder who develops these learning goals and how multiple situations in different countries influence their ability to meet this expectation. The student finds inner balance in the knowledge that these goals are not set for their country, which results in unfair expectations from outside. Through dialogue the student is able to critically reflect on the situations that influence their own experience of inadequacy but also finds a balance in understanding their own role as part of a larger system (Hermans, 2012; see Chen, 2025 about similar perspectives within the context of international online teacher

education). The student's use of dialogical self and positioning is interesting as they are able to be both critical and in alliance with their own country positioning.

These different examples of movement through dialogue show how virtual exchanges seem to influence the students' identity construction (Ligorio, 2010; Peng & Dervin, 2022). Additionally, it is evident that the positioning and repositioning journey of the dialogical self is rarely linear, as the students can show temporary moments of empathy development and awareness, which can be later contradicted with other positions. In this sense, these movements could show the never-ending and unstable process of 'doing' interculturality, as the students are constantly moving between moments of repositioning, change and learning to moments of status quo and returning to balance (Dervin, 2023; Chen, 2025). The in-direct presence of others, in the form of *others-in-self* and *promoter positions,* leads to these movements in the self.

6.1.2. Movements in a monologue

The written reflections of our participants did not always include construction of a dialogical self. In contrast to the dialogical (re-)construction seen in the previous section, there were some students whose reflections did not include dialogue between positions. Their reflections were more of a monologue, with a list of different positions that emerged independent from other positions (Esau & Friess, 2022; Liu, 2021). For example, student SIF14 constructed their thoughts as a monologue-like list:

> In short,
> - Life Changing experience.
> - [C]ommunication problem but, great learning experience.
> - Language barrier but,
> - Machine translation supports the chat so,
> - [C]hinese directly start to speak in [C]hinese
> - Idea flows we all enjoyed (Excerpt 4 - Student SIF14)

From their list it can be seen that the virtual exchange experience was influential to them and that behind the list there are different positions that influenced the students, such as *Communication as promoter, The learning experience as promoter,* and *The other students as different,* but the student does not engage themselves closely with their reflection but seems to be keeping a distance from it. This lack of dialogue in the reflection may be explained with the way the student begins their reflection with the exclamation 'in short'. The beginning may imply that this student submitted their reflection in a hurry, with their list seeming almost like a ticked box on their to-do list. Due to the hurried

way of expression in their reflection, their learning or reflection process is not visible, and the positions shift in seemingly unconnected manner.

Another example of monological reflections occurred with students who remained mostly within an observing meta-position during their reflections. These reflections communicated the events of the online exchange experience but minimized any dialogue between positions. An example can be seen in student SIC16's reflection where they state:

> We focused on Chinese higher education in discussions. China has made great efforts in higher education: In 2020, the gross enrolment rate of China's higher education has reached 54.4%, higher than the global average. There are 40.02 million students in higher education. China has built the largest higher education system in the world. As a developing country, this is a great achievement. (Excerpt 5 - Student SIC16)

In their reflections, the student begins temporarily engaged in *we as a group* (Hermans, 2016) but quickly transitions into a meta-position in which the student embodies the *we as country position* and recounts the successes of China. For this student the group and country positions seem to be more comfortable than engaging in personal inner reflection (Dervin, 2016). This type of distant monologue may suggest that the student did not feel engaged during the virtual exchange and did not engage in inner dialogue as a result, or they may not have felt comfortable sharing their experiences to the teacher, thus staying in safe and distant monologue.

These examples show that occasionally students' reflections did not exhibit dialogue between different positions rather than some positions within a distant monologue (Hermans, 2001; Kadianaki et al., 2014. This does not mean that no intercultural learning occurred for the students who remained monological but there are no indications of this in the reflections written for us teachers and researchers.

6.2. Construction of new and third positions as part of the dialogical self

Encountering new people and new situations can influence our identity positioning and re-positioning processes (Dervin, 2016; Dervin & Jackson, 2018; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Peng & Dervin, 2022). Virtual exchange can act as a catalyst as students are faced with new situations that influence their identities. These situations can spark a positioning process that results in the development of new identities and construction of mediator positions, defined by DST as third positions. Third position emerges to balance the conflicting perspectives or identities and to restore the stability in between their

identities (Káplár-Kodácsy & Dorner, 2020). In their reflections most students utilized dialogical self as part of their learning and meaning-making process but only some constructed what appear to be completely new identities as a result of their experience. The fact that they were asked to write 200-word essays which did not allow extensive writing about the impact of the online exchanges may have a role to play in this.

The positions that emerged from the inner dialogue were often related to the development of new learner identities, critical thought or empathy, such as *I as a non-perfect open learner, I as an empathetic learner,* and *I as a critical thinker*. These new positions show how students utilized dialogical self in their intercultural learning process. An example of this process can be seen in student SIF03's reflection:

> Since this was my first meeting with [the group members from China], we did not have any disagreements because we were in the beginning phase of getting to know each other. I quickly opened up to the group since I saw that they were the same age as me. [Team member from Finnish university] covered her experience in the [their country's] education system and I covered my experience in [my country's] education system. [Team member from Finnish university] showed particular interest in Indigenous people and I was interested in people living in rural areas. I recall [the group members from China] asking [the team member from Finnish university] about preschool in [their country]. To finish off the meeting, I showed the group two elementary level Finnish reading books that I am currently reading. I felt a friendly atmosphere and was interested if they knew about Finding Nemo since it may bring back childhood memories. (Excerpt 6 - Student SIF03)

This student's experience is largely influenced by the perception of *others-in-the-self as similar or safe* which seems to fuel the shift between different identities from teacher position to a learner, to the construction of a new position of *I as a non-perfect open learner*. The student's experience of safety and security allows them to be more open and vulnerable, for example showing that they are reading elementary school books and are still a learner. The warmth of others, combined with learning and education as promoters, help the student to develop the new non-perfect learner identity. Overall, the lack of perceived risk or danger allow the student to engage in constantly moving inner dialogue, moving between different learner and teacher positions whilst maintaining a balance in the self (Chen, 2025; Simpson, 2024). This reflection shows the significance of perceived security in constructing a dialogical self and engaging in a dialogue to (re-)negotiate new positions within the self (Bhatia & Ram, 2001).

In contrast to the experience of safety, some students developed new positions as a reaction to the experience of feeling less skilled or experienced than others. For many students, this type of identity exploration was triggered by the use of English as a language of communication. This was often the case especially with the students from China, who were in a more unfamiliar setting with the language, not having so many opportunities to use the language outside classrooms and with speakers of languages other than Chinese. The situation and the way these students positioned the other as better resulted in positioning themselves as 'incompetent' or not as good as the other. These situations were then often negotiated, and the students developed third positions of improver or active learner to restore their balance (see e.g., Wang, 2013). An example of this journey occurs in student SIC09's reflection:

> We briefly introduced the ethnic groups of China to them, and told them about the inner high class system through our own experience. They thought it was very interesting and hoped to learn more about ethnic groups in China later. The meeting [was] unfortunate since [us] three students have poor oral English, [and] can't fluent[ly carry] on the discussion with them. I want to optimize the measures [for the next meeting], in order to enhance communication effect and feelings, [in] hopes [of] deeper academic exchanges with them[. I] also hope to be able to build a better friendship with Finland's classmates. (Excerpt 7 - Student SIC09)

At the beginning the student embodies a teacher position, and whilst the other is perceived as nice and interested, the situation forces the student to shift to an inadequate position, due to their own skills and language abilities. The student seems to use a meta-position effectively to look at the situation from a more objective position and develops a new position, *I as an improving learner and improver*, where the student actively plans for the future meetings and ways to fix the experience. This position is created from the cross-section of *I as a teacher* and *I as incompetent* to fix the discrepancies that the situation created internally (Hermans, 2012).

Although new positions were often developed to increase empathy towards others or the self, in some cases, a third position was created to resolve emotional conflict created by the learning experience. This often occurred especially after a student had positioned themselves against a powerful entity (e.g., governance in their own country), which created an internal conflict. In these moments, the students developed some sort of a mediator identity to balance the conflict. One example is student SIC24 who developed a mediator third position as part of their reflection:

> Maybe some families can afford the [education] expenses, but they also cannot get the good education resources due to region. In many provinces of [C]hina, the differences in quality of teachers are also enlarging. Because you study in [a] local school, you had better to have the local household registration, otherwise you should suffer complex the government processes and even fail. But nowadays, the situation become better. (Excerpt 8 - Student SIC24)

Here the student begins from a critical thinker position, considering how systems influence someone's access to education (Dervin, 2025). The system acts as a promoter, and allows the student to consider how education is organized and who has access to it. After this the student moves to consider the situation in China through a critical lens but this causes an inner conflict which results in them ending in a more positive final statement. This movement highlights that even when learning in dialogical self occurs certain situations can be too much for the student and they need to neutralize the blow through developing a mediator position (Peng & Dervin, 2022). Another possible reason for a given shift between positions can also be the influential and somewhat omnipresent other, teachers who will read what the students have written in their essays. As such, it could be that the student was not comfortable criticising their country's policies openly in an educational setting and had to thus neutralize their reflection. This is also something that is important to consider when utilising reflective exercises as a learning tool: there is always a performative element to the writing as someone else will read them (Blasco, 2012). The fact that the teacher becomes an internalized other, can always influence how the reflections are constructed.

In addition to the overall virtual exchange experience, also course topic (as a reminder: the United Nation SGD 4) was significant in development of *third positions*. Education systems, the sustainable development goals and systems of power often acted as promoter positions influencing the development of these empathetic or critical third positions in the data. An example of this is contained in student SIC22's reflection:

> This conference made me understand the development of SDG4 in different countries. In fact, most of the factors that lead to the unbalanced development of SDG4 are similar, such as the lack of universal education, the poor use of teaching resources, the influence of the environment, and so on. (Excerpt 9 - Student SIC22)

The student begins their reflection by showing a changed positioning, where the experience and discussions have caused them to move to a new more aware position. The way they position themselves suggests that through inner dialogue they have been able to reflect on what impacts quality education, and

look at it more critically and broadly. Their reflection shows that they are able to develop a new position *I as an empathetic learner* through reflecting on how systems influence a country's ability to fulfil Sustainable Development Goals.

The new positions and third positions could show how dialogical self helped students to reflect on their experience, develop empathy and self-awareness. Through the use of dialogical self and by engaging in internal dialogues, the students seem to be able to find a balance, reflect on themselves and construct new positions (Chen, 2025). In some cases, it is also evident that the use of dialogical self allowed the students to reflect on themselves and their backgrounds somewhat more critically, creating potentially new self-awareness.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Following Dervin's and his collaborators' long-term engagement with critical interculturality in communication and education (e.g., Dervin, 2008, 2025; Simpson, 2024; Chen, 2025), this study aimed to understand how students position themselves and construct a dialogical self to support intercultural learning following virtual exchanges and how Dialogical Self Theory can aid in evaluating such initiatives. Many interculturalists contend that education could provide crucial opportunities for this learning, encouraging and enhancing self-awareness and the ability to reflect on identity (Dervin & Jackson, 2018; Finke & Sökefeld, 2018; Leijen et al., 2018). Through intercultural learning, students can mindfully (re-)negotiate their positions by utilising a dialogical self (Schellhammer, 2018a; Xu, 2013). Our paper contributes to understanding how international virtual exchange, combined with reflexive tasks, could facilitate intercultural learning and support students' potential empathy development through the dialogical self in, for example, educational sciences, including teacher education.

The purpose was to research how students in China and Finland use different, and at times similar, positions to construct a dialogical self in their written reflections. Most students employed various personal positions, such as I as a learner, I as incomplete, we as a new group, and we as learners. Many also constructed new personal positions, like I as empathetic learner, I as active improver, and I as a new learner, as a result of internal dialogue.

The students constructed a dialogical self to make sense of their experiences, negotiate between old and new positions and establish new positions to maintain a balance within the self (Hermans, 2012). Through internal dialogue, they seem to have resolved some internal conflicts, developed more empathetic responses and reflected on elements influencing their

thoughts and beliefs. The dialogue between positions and the construction of a dialogical self could thus support intercultural learning by helping students widen their inner world and develop a more aware approach towards themselves and others in the context of online cooperation (Hermans & Gieser, 2011).

Some students, however, did not seem to actively engage in inner dialogue in their essays. As previously discussed, this may stem from unclear instructions, the use of English as the language of reflection and/or unfamiliarity with reflective exercises in education (Moate, 2023). This suggests that while virtual exchanges could influence identity negotiation and intercultural learning for some, they may not impact everyone. Situational factors like poor internet connection, language barriers, a lack of connection between participants and/or low motivation could negatively influence the process. Additionally, short-term exchanges may not yield long-term learning which could be 'grasped' in a short 200-word essay.

The results show that post-exchange reflection helped many students negotiate their identities and become more aware of the inner 'others' and promoter positions influencing their identification. We thus maintain that, in intercultural learning, encountering different perspectives can support self-reflection and the development of self-awareness and empathy (Dervin, 2023, 2025; Mesker et al., 2018; Xu, 2013).

While this study focused on Chinese and Finnish students, we believe that the core mechanisms of intercultural learning observed (internal negotiation, perspective-taking and identity repositioning) are highly relevant to other contexts, such as US students studying abroad. The specific 'other' (here: Chinese or Finnish) is less critical than the structured opportunity to 'do' interculturality and reflect upon it. For students from dominant or highly represented national backgrounds, engaging with partners from underrepresented destinations can be particularly powerful. It disrupts preconceived notions of e.g., 'cultural centrality' and enhances the same dialogical skills needed for dealing with any *complex* intercultural environment, whether in a major global capital or a less-frequented location. The pedagogical value lies not in the specific national identities involved but in creating a framework that triggers self-dialogue.

Further research could investigate how long-term reflexive exercises (instead of one single reflection as was the case here) and meta-reflection influence the use of the dialogical self and its impact on intercultural learning. Similar studies should also be conducted in other disciplines, such as sociology and communication studies, to see how the disciplinary context impacts students' construction and use of the dialogical self.

Our study indicates that many students negotiated between different positions and developed new ones as a result of the experience. In agreement with existing research, using reflections and engaging in internal dialogue can support intercultural learning (Dervin, 2023; Monereo & Hermans, 2023). Furthermore, we found that the discussion topic and the class setting, through common challenges, played a significant role in identity negotiation (Busse & Krause, 2015). Using international educational policy as a topic for discussion (such as SDGs) and a task to solve influenced many students' critical and empathetic positioning. This aligns with Mesker et al. (2018), who found that problem-solving often prompts the self to seek balance faster and be more open to new opportunities, thereby supporting intercultural learning.

There were certain limitations. First, using English for reflections meant many students wrote in a language they are not fluent or confident in, potentially losing important nuances and leading to unbalanced power relations between them. Additionally, the use of written reflections can be a limitation. While we assume the reflections are honest, the documented dialogues and the constructed dialogical self may differ in reality. Furthermore, the academic context of the assignments may have altered the written reality, with most reflections constructing a positive outcome, possibly due to 'intercultural correctness' (Dervin, 2017). Future studies could investigate reflective tasks within virtual exchanges over a longer period, focusing on continuous intercultural learning and the construction of the dialogical self. However, in general, the findings support international online exchange and reflective exercises as tools for intercultural learning. Reflection can allow students to understand their experiences, find new meanings and positions through negotiation, and develop self-awareness and empathy.

Further research could also investigate how long-term reflexive exercises and meta-reflection influence the use of the dialogical self and its impact on intercultural learning. Similar studies could also be conducted in other disciplines, such as sociology and communication studies, to see how the disciplinary context impacts students' construction and use of the dialogical self.

Ethical Approval

Formal ethical approval was not required for this study involving human participants, as the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Helsinki does not mandate ethics clearance for research aimed at improving teacher education. Nonetheless, we adhered to the guidelines set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK; see https://tenk.fi/sites/default/files/2023-11/RI_Guidelines_2023.pdf). Participants were informed that they could withdraw their data from the study at any time for research purposes. This

analysis includes only data from students who did not withdraw their responses. Additionally, written informed consent was obtained from all participants by the second and third authors.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

The relevant contributions presented in the study are within this paper. Any further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Credit author statement

HM: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review editing. **FD:** Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – revision based on reviews. **HL:** Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review editing.

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