

# **From Curriculum Design to Identity Formation: The Practical Dilemmas and Innovative Practices of Intercultural Education in Chinese International Schools**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the practical challenges encountered by international schools in China within the framework of intercultural education. The findings reveal significant deficiencies in the effectiveness of current educational practices, which are often excessively commercialized. This trend inevitably results in an overemphasis on academic achievement, while neglecting the essential development of students' intercultural adaptability. The root of this issue can be attributed to several structural factors, including a lack of intrinsic motivation among students, a systemic shortage of teaching resources, the absence of professional evaluation mechanisms, and a weak consensus across the industry. Theoretically, effective intercultural adaptation should focus on “intercultural identity,” emphasizing integration rather than the assimilation of one's original cultural identity. The research identifies that certain innovative practices, particularly those employing project-based learning models, have successfully guided students in actively constructing their cultural identities, facilitating a transformation from superficial awareness to profound identification. These experiences hold the potential for replication. Future educational initiatives should transcend the logic of commercialization and adopt a systemic design centered on identity integration, with the goal of cultivating students as culturally grounded communicative bridges.

**Keywords** Intercultural education; intercultural adaptation; cultural identity; innovative practice

## **1 Introduction**

In contemporary China, the intercultural curricula provided by international schools often deviate from their intended objectives. These programs are frequently regarded as “educational commodities,” neglecting the essential need to foster students' intercultural adaptability. This issue is prevalent within the current international education system and is primarily influenced by a combination of structural factors, including students' lack of intrinsic motivation, a scarcity of instructional design resources, and the absence of systematic evaluation and integration. Although some schools have started to explore innovative approaches, both research and practical implementation are still in the early stages.

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## 2 Literature Review

In recent years, the shortcomings of intercultural curricula in Chinese international schools can, in part, be attributed to the effects of commodification. As noted in the study by Wu and Koh (2021), “Findings of this study have pointed out issues relating to the commodification of international schooling and education. In China, the positional goods of education that are being constructed and traded at international schools have extensively (re)shaped their educational ecology.”<sup>[1]</sup> The researchers believe that this process has, to some extent, obscured or even replaced practices with intrinsic educational significance. Within the framework of commodification, schools primarily focus on whether students can acquire this “product,” rather than on their ability to adapt to future cultural environments in both their studies and daily lives.

Another perspective involves psychological factors. Many Chinese students merely view studying abroad as an opportunity to escape the intense pressures associated with further education under the Chinese domestic education system. According to Young’s article (2017), 63% of students cited this issue<sup>[2]</sup>. With this mindset, students often struggle to engage with intercultural courses, making it challenging for educational institutions to sustain these ineffective programs.

Nonetheless, the current state of development is still commendable. Compared to “Review of International Schools and International School Curricula”<sup>[3]</sup> conducted in 2001, several institutions have now introduced dedicated courses focused on the cultures of students’ target countries. Although follow-up research in academic literature remains limited, promotional materials from various international schools suggest the effectiveness of these programs. By inviting foreign teachers or individuals with overseas study experience to share personal cultural narratives—or through direct online collaborative exchange projects with local schools—these initiatives have significantly assisted students in adapting to foreign cultures, extending beyond mere language acquisition.

Moreover, in broader research and practice, teaching methods have become increasingly diversified. In addition to traditional approaches, such as virtual dialogues between sister schools and inviting returnees or foreign educators to deliver lectures, some schools have organized joint performance visits, providing students with a wider array of opportunities to understand different cultures. However, despite this diversity, these methods still lack a systematic theoretical framework. The learning content remains inconsistent, making it challenging to ensure the quality of student learning.

At present, Teachers primarily rely on self-developed course materials, while intercultural content appears sporadically in various foreign language textbooks. In her research, Wang Jing(2013) noted, “Foreign language textbooks in China mainly focus on linguistic knowledge, with few contents addressing cultural depth. The College English Curriculum Requirements only mention intercultural communicative competence without providing further elaboration.”<sup>[4]</sup> This observation underscores a significant gap in the development of teaching materials for intercultural education.

At the same time, Wang Jing(2013) noted in the article that “in teaching, some teachers attempt to incorporate intercultural elements, but most of them are superficial designs and fail to be systematic and comprehensive.”<sup>[4]</sup> This suggests that while many educators recognize the significance of intercultural education, few have succeeded in developing effective and coherent curricula for their students. Eleven years after her paper was published, some teachers in select international schools have begun to explore innovative approaches to intercultural curriculum design. However, these initiatives remain confined to a limited number of institutions. The majority of international schools have not announced any plans to establish dedicated curriculum series for intercultural education. This indicates that although an increasing number of individual educators are becoming aware of the importance of intercultural education, the field as a whole still lacks widespread attention and prioritization.

### 3 Theoretical Foundations

#### 3.1 The Concept of Intercultural Identity

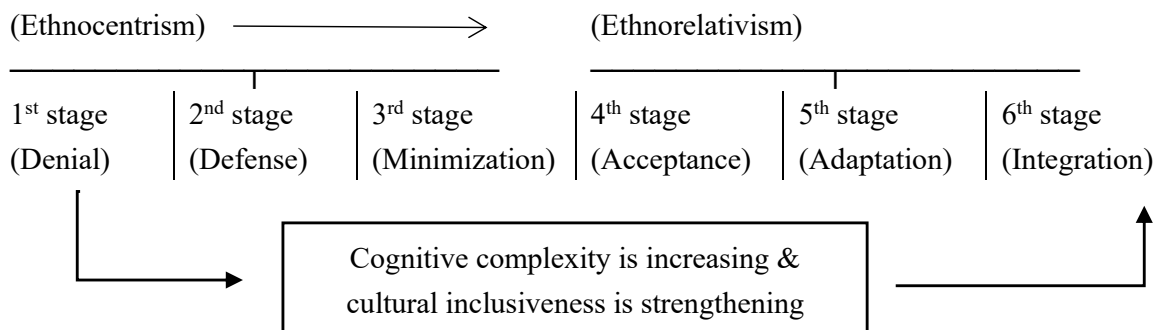
Cultural identity refers to the social-psychological process through which an individual internalizes and develops a sense of belonging to their culture and cultural group. The concept of intercultural identity is rooted in the theory of cultural identity proposed by American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. This process involves acquiring, maintaining, and innovating one's own cultural practices. Some scholars further define cultural identity as the affirmative cognitive process developed by members of an ethnic community through long-term immersion in that community, emphasizing the elements that hold the most significance for their group. As a form of collective identity, cultural identity represents a sense of affiliation with a cultural group whose members share symbolic systems, frameworks of meaning, and codes of conduct.

Adler(1985)<sup>[5]</sup> argued that intercultural identity represents a new form of belonging—an advanced reintegration of culture and personality that emerges when an individual's original identity begins to disintegrate under pressure and conflict. Those who transcend singular cultural identities embrace both the universality and diversity of humanity as their guiding principles. They possess a broad cultural perspective, can tolerate diverse lifestyles, and are capable of navigating complex communicative contexts. Such individuals, who identify with multiple cultures, are often referred to as multicultural individuals, intercultural persons, or cosmopolitans.

According to Kim Y. Y.(2001)<sup>[6]</sup>, intercultural identity is a transcendent form of self-identification that develops through the process of intercultural adaptation. In this process, individuals overcome the stress associated with unfamiliar environments and attain comprehensive communicative competence, as well as psychological well-being.

Closely related to this is the concept of cosmopolitan nationalism, introduced by Wright, Ma, and Auld(2022) in their research. They proposed that “Being both global and Chinese was not only compatible but perceived to be central to their identities.”<sup>[7]</sup> This assertion further affirms the emerging trend in the field of intercultural education: the goal is not to teach students to abandon their native culture in favor of a new one, but rather to help them become representatives of their original culture within intercultural communities. This approach not only supports students in developing a coherent sense of self but also encourages them to understand that universities and global communities value individuals who can appreciate other cultures while utilizing their native cultural background to help others expand their global outlook—rather than those who are simply assimilated into another culture.

Chart 1.DMIS Model schematic diagram and core framework



This perspective is further supported by the research conducted by McAllister and Irvine(2000), who developed the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)<sup>[8]</sup>(see Chart 1). This model describes a progression of changes in behavior, cognition, and affect, while addressing learners subjective experiences in understanding how different cultures “create and sustain worldviews.” As the article states,

“In the sixth and final stage, integration, people are not merely sensitive to other cultures, but rather they are in the process of becoming a part of and apart from a given cultural context”

Therefore, the design of intercultural curricula can utilize this model to systematically develop a teaching plan. The teacher’s role should shift from instructing students on how to assimilate into a specific cultural context to guiding them on how to preserve their independence while engaging with that cultural background.

### 3.2 Intercultural Identity in Education

In He Jiayin’s study(2023) on the relationship between the core ability of intercultural adaptation and emotional distress of high school students in international schools, she posits that intercultural identity is a crucial factor. “Intercultural identity refers to the sense of belonging that an individual has to multiple cultures or ethnic groups, which needs to be formed in the process of interaction and communication. Individuals with a high degree of intercultural identity are able to integrate their different cultural identities. This is a highly open, highly adaptable and integrated value orientation of self and others. ” [9] Integrating different cultural identities involves not only embracing the new culture but also discovering one’s own position within the intercultural community through one’s native culture. The term discussed in the article is self-identity.

This self-identity theory reveals the essence of intercultural identity integration: Self-identity acts as the psychological cornerstone for constructing an intercultural identity. It necessitates that individuals engage in continuous reflection during cultural encounters (such as Chinese modesty versus American assertiveness), resolve conflicts between the native and new cultures, and form a unified cognitive framework of the multifaceted self. This process eventually enables individuals to define their role positions within cross-cultural communities (for example, utilizing collective wisdom in collaborative environments while actively expressing themselves in decision-making situations). In fact, this dynamic mechanism can be simply illustrated by the following phased model(Chart 2).

Chart 2: Phased Model

Self-identity → Self-reflection triggered by cultural encounters → Reconstruction of value coordinates →  
Integration of intercultural identity

In summary, self-identity is of great significance for intercultural education. “The impact of cultural differences may hinder the process of identity exploration of adolescents, and the resulting self-identity difficulties will have a negative impact on intercultural adaptation.” [9] This highlights a critical issue in intercultural education: schools often emphasize the importance of helping students accept foreign cultures while neglecting the development of students’ self-cultural identity within the intercultural communities they will encounter in future universities. Consequently, students may struggle to accurately understand their position within the group and find it challenging to integrate into the intercultural community.

## 4 Curriculum Designing

A notable example of a curriculum that significantly assists students in developing their self-cultural identity is the Chinese Cultural Core (3C) program offered by the Guangzhou Foreign Language School.[10]

### 4.1 Course Features

The 3C program primarily utilizes a project-based learning approach, enabling students to explore the connection between the individual and their native culture through hands-on experiences. Two projects stand out as particularly representative.

The first is a bilingual hand-drawn poster project titled “Across Time: A Dialogue with Heroes” details as follows (Table 1).

Table 1: Bilingual Poster Project: "Across Time: A Dialogue with Heroes"

Design Dimension	Specific Content
Title	A bilingual hand-drawn poster project titled “Across Time: A Dialogue with Heroes.”
form	Teamwork-no more than 5 students per team
Content	To select a real-life issue that they are personally concerned about—this could pertain to any field, such as literature, science, engineering, business, society, or the arts. They are then tasked with imagining a journey through time to interview a historical figure and discuss potential solutions to the issue.
Core objective	To enable students to explore the connection between the individual and their native culture through hands-on experiences
Assessment index	1. Accuracy in contextualizing the backgrounds and ideologies of historical figures, with an emphasis on the rigorous citation of historical sources. 2. Logical consistency in correlating contemporary issues with historical figures, focusing on the in-depth excavation of cultural commonalities. 3. Fluency in bilingual representation and effectiveness in cultural-semiotic adaptation, examining cross-linguistic symbolic alignment.
Assessment Method	Student self-assessment: 20%; Peer evaluation: 20%; Teacher assessment: 30%; External expert review: 30% Full score: 100
Assessment results	20 outstanding works will be selected through comprehensive scoring will be exhibited in campus public spaces via thematic exhibitions each year. The creators present the project outcomes at grade-wide academic conferences.
Effectiveness	This project provides students with a high degree of autonomy, enhances their ability to collaborate, and ignites their interest in cultural identity through creative exploration.

The second project is a stage play titled “Alliances and Diplomacy: Performing History” details as follows (Table 2).

Together, these two projects help students develop a strong sense of self-identity, thereby avoiding what He Jiayin refers to as the “self-identity dilemma” that may hinder adolescent identity development. Consequently, students are better prepared to navigate intercultural adaptation with diminished psychological conflict.

## 4.2 Successful Practices and Replicability

As stated in a promotional post for the project, “The 3C Program also offers Advanced Placement (AP) and Advanced Level (AL) students a unique perspective for crafting their application essays: Who am I? Where do I come from? How can I introduce myself and my country to others and to the world?”

The 3C Program not only serves a practical purpose by assisting students in their applications to overseas universities, but it also provides these institutions with a clear framework for assessing students’ intercultural competence. Students who can effectively respond to the questions posed above demonstrate a well-developed understanding of both their own cultural identity and intercultural dynamics, which equips them for active participation in diverse, multicultural environments. This positions the 3C Program as a successful model in the field of intercultural education.

According to updates from the official WeChat account of IPMC Student Perspective, the 3C program has been implemented for three consecutive years. Each year, the project-based learning activities

Table 2: Historical Stage Play: "Alliances and Diplomacy: Performing History"

Design Dimension	Specific Content
Title form	A stage play titled "Alliances and Diplomacy: Performing History" Group performance
Content	Advanced Placement (AP) and A-Level students collaborated to reenact ten significant episodes from Chinese diplomatic history. These episodes included "The Meeting at Mianchi," "Jianzhen's Eastward Journey to Japan," "Princess Wencheng's Marriage into Tibet," "The Destruction of Opium at Humen," "Jing Ke's Assassination Attempt on the King of Qin," "Wang Zhaojun Departs for the Frontier," "Tang Ju Defends His Mission," "The Margary Affair," "Su Wu Tending Sheep," and "Xuanzang's Journey to the West." The project skillfully integrated these ancient narratives with contemporary diplomatic affairs, creating meaningful parallels between historical and modern intercultural engagement.
Core objective	To gain a deeper understanding of how to communicate with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and how to express their own cultural identity while respecting that of others.
Assessment index	1. Students' ability to accurately reproduce the background of 10 historical events, diplomatic strategies, and the core of cultural conflicts; 2. The authenticity of cultural respect, conflict resolution and identity negotiation presented in the performance; 3. Students' deductive ability to apply historical strategies to resolve new conflicts
Assessment Method	Student self-assessment: 20%; Audience evaluation: 20%; Teacher assessment: 30%; External expert review: 30% Full score: 100
Assessment results	The top three outstanding plays of each year will be adapted into a intercultural education case library and incorporated into the school-based curriculum
Effectiveness	By performing diplomatic history plays, students experience cultural conflicts, stimulate self-reflection, and thereby understand how self-identity drives the formation of intercultural identity.

have produced consistent outcomes. Furthermore, both hand-drawn posters and historical stage plays are common forms of project work in Chinese secondary schools, indicating that the Chinese Cultural Core curriculum at Guangzhou Foreign Language School is highly replicable.

## 5 Conclusion

Although there are numerous challenges, such as the commercialization of course content, lack of student motivation, inadequate systematic course design, absence of consensus within the industry, and insufficient systematic development, there are still ongoing projects. The project-based teaching approach of the 3C course at Guangzhou Foreign Language School fosters students' subjectivity and facilitates identity construction, successfully achieving a transition from cognition to identity, and demonstrating replicable and promotable value. In the coming years, this successful experience can be widely recognized in the industry, emphasizing the importance of identity integration rather than assimilation, and remove the negative effects of identity barriers that hinder adaptation, thereby better equipping students to serve as cultural bridges in their studies and lives abroad, and to enhance communication at both individual and national levels.

Despite ongoing challenges—such as the commodification of curriculum content, students' lack of



motivation, the absence of systematic course design, a lack of industry consensus, and insufficient structural development—promising initiatives have nonetheless emerged. The project-based approach of the Chinese Cultural Core (3C) curriculum at Guangzhou Foreign Language School successfully activates student subjectivity and supports the construction of cultural identity. It effectively facilitates a transition “from cognition to identification” and demonstrates significant potential for replication and broader application.

In the coming years, if these successful experiences gain widespread recognition within the field, they can help shift the general emphasis of intercultural education from cultural assimilation to identity integration. By removing identity-related barriers that hinder adaptation, this approach will better support students in becoming cultural bridges during their overseas academic journeys, thereby enhancing communication at both the personal and national levels.

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