Towards Postcolonial Pedagogies: How Graduate Teaching Assistants foster collectivism and transcultural classrooms

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Abstract

Research on international Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) commonly emphasises deficits. Themes include lack of proficiency in English; deficiency of teaching experience; and 'incomplete' professional identity. Such framing neglects the resources that international GTAs bring to their classrooms. This study looks specifically at lived experiences of four GTAs, examining their identity work through the 'transcultural' and collectivist exchanges they foster in their classrooms. The study approaches 'Internationalisation' through the perspectives of four female GTAs from former colonies, to examine how they deploy strategies to decentre power and 'de-individualise' the classroom. Here these postcolonial perspectives affirm that international education is not a one-way process from 'core' to 'periphery', but a complex transcultural inter-change. Identifying these collectivist and 'transcultural' teaching practices suggests future avenues for research, towards identifying whether/how postcolonial GTAs develop postcolonial pedagogies.

Keywords: Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs); postcolonial pedagogy, transcultural exchange, individualism, collectivism

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Introduction

With the drive for international recruitment in UK Higher Education (UKHE) since the 1980s, international students are considered as economic assets for Universities through fee income (Robson, 2011; Humfrey, 2011). However, they are also framed as 'problems' (Ryan, 2011). Ryan's (2011, p. 637) research shows that 'the existing literature on international students [...] until relatively recently, has often illustrated [...] a 'deficit' approach towards their capabilities'. Another key facet of internationalisation is that a body of the international students studying for PhDs are doing so on the basis that they will teach throughout their doctoral projects. Whilst some scholarship seeks to consider the benefits of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs)' work (e.g. Jordan & Howe, 2018; Winter, Turner, Gedye, Nash & Grant, 2015), research on international GTAs frequently features themes similar to this deficit approach. Common themes are lack of proficiency in English, different cultural background (Ji & Bergerson, 2008; Borjas, 2002; Kim, 2009); lack of teaching experience (Plakans, 1997; Muzaka, 2009); whilst GTAs in general are seen as having 'incomplete' professional identity (Harland & Plangger 2004; Winstone & Moore, 2017). Literature that discusses international GTAs (itself a relatively recent field) classes them as a homogenous group, and does not examine sub groups, such as GTAs from former colonies.

I argue that a deficit approach, which accentuates problems GTAs face, does not take into account their creativity, how they use their backgrounds and experiences as a resource, and how they develop practices that challenge Western systems of education that place which privilege the individual (Freire, 1975; Hooks, 1994; Heble, 2002). This is not to deny the challenges GTAs face in their roles, but to contextualise these with an emphasis on what international GTAs bring to UKHE.

My research set out to explore the experiences of ten international GTAs. In the course of this investigation, themes emerged in my work with four GTAs from

postcolonial countries, where their teaching perspectives drew on collectivism and resisted what they saw as Western individualism in UKHE. I concentrate on the narratives of these four female GTAs (from India, Egypt, Kenya and Nigeria), to explore their perceptions of their own practice. Within discussions evidence emerged of their non-alignment with institutional expectations. The GTAs also developed approaches to teaching that promoted group learning (and challenged individualism): 1. The teacher as 'decentred'; 2. Facilitation of a transcultural classroom.

GTAs teaching in UKHE

Whilst the education sector is growing around the world, Anglo-American higher education seemingly dominates resources of knowledge production (Lo, 2011). Despite evidence of ancient higher education in Egypt and China, 'The modern university is generally assumed to be a Western institution' (Collins & Bethke 2017, p. 1809). This is unsurprising as higher education was central to the West's colonizing mission, with 'the subjugation of local knowledge and promotion of the Western knowledge as the universal knowledge' (Heleta, 2016, p. 2). International GTAs operate within this global context of Western domination in higher education: this will have diverse connotations for international GTAs who hail from the Global North (Canada, USA), or Australia, China or Japan, or former UK colonies. For those who were educated (and have taught in) postcolonial educational institutions, the colonial legacy has context-dependent meanings. Ginsburg and Megahed (2008) link government discourses on democratisation to moves towards classroom democratisation in Egypt; in India the government mandates University curriculum (Sharma & Mir, 2006), yet is also concerned with how education promotes democratisation (Baral, 2006). Yet in this study, whilst GTAs from Egypt

emphasised the hierarchical structures at universities, and in Indian universities emphasized teacher-centred practices, these experiences did not straightforwardly determine the GTAs' teaching styles (both Egyptian and Indian interviewees sought to make teaching inclusive and to break barriers).

Whilst GTAs experienced decolonised education at home, Ahmed (2012, p. 32) suggests that UK Universities (among other organisations) are 'institutional[ly] white': '[t]he very idea that diversity is about those people who 'look different' shows us how it can keep whiteness in place'. The UK University is a space of subtle racism for non-white women, which operates through 'a politics of exclusion' (Sadhvi & Ibrahim, 2019, p. 2). Thus, if GTAs are liminal (Winstone & Moore, 2017), and non-white women in the academy are excluded, female GTAs from former colonies are doubly marginalised. However, teaching and strategies within the classroom potentially offer GTAs opportunities for identity work which challenge this.

Against these legacies, Brazilian educator Freire (1975, p. 30) argues that education liberates 'coordinator' and student, through collectivism and decentring of power relations into the dynamic of the learning environment. Dialogue is not 'a simple exchange of ideas' to be 'consumed' by the participants (1975, p. 60). This is juxtaposed to 'the banking concept' legacy of colonial/Western education: 'knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (1975, p. 46). hooks (1994) builds on Freire's notions, arguing for embodied pedagogy; for Heble (2002, p. 151) 'postcolonial pedagogy' challenges 'unsettl[es] powerfully entrenched and institutionalized notions of individualism'. This echoes Moore-Gilbert (2009, p. 2) who argues that postcolonial approaches reject the 'Unitary Cartesian subject' for a 'decentred subjectivity'. These approaches, applicable

across subjects, also challenge how Western classrooms have conceived students as individuals steered by an authoritative teacher (Freire, 1975).

Similarly, Ryan's (2013 p. 287) notion of the 'transcultural classroom' emphasises equal exchanges between international students, where there is 'mutual and respectful exchange of ideas rather than the simple integration of knowledge from one culture into another'. Where teachers are from postcolonial countries, this model can be qualified with an awareness of power relations, and the possibility for exchange, mutual dialogue and 'reciprocal learning' (Ryan, 2013, p. 287) between teacher and student. Identifying these collectivist and 'transcultural' teaching practices suggests future avenues for research around whether these GTAs develop postcolonial pedagogies.

Materials and methods

Participants

My initial study interviewed twelve participants at a UK 'Plate glass' University (ethical approval was granted as participants were de-identified). Of these participants, who responded to a call for study participants, two were home students, ten were international (six were female, six were male). I decided to focus on a group of four women (see Table X1: Supplemental online material) as these participants all described breaking barriers in their classrooms, and together formed a coherent group who focused on collectivism in a particular way. The narratives obtained from these GTAs revealed thematic correspondences across their accounts. Whilst participants in other interviews identified either the importance of mobility or sought to work as partners with students, neither inclusivity nor groupwork emerged in discussions on pedagogy (although group work took place in their classrooms). Furthermore, female GTAs from former colonies are

underrepresented as a distinct group in current research.

The initial study design drew on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, focusing on a small homogenous sample: by concentrating on the four female GTAs from former colonies, the sample became more similar. My position as researcher was in 'trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of [experience]' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 3). Consequently, the research outcomes can be considered for 'theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalizability' (Smith et al, 2009, p. 51).

In this article each participant is pseudonymised with a popular girl's name in from her country: Amiya, Tale, Nneka, and Mercy. Of those who had teaching experience in postcolonial colleges or Universities, all felt that this was something they brought with them to their teaching practice in the UK. The participant without prior teaching experience, suggested that 'my background in terms of knowledge is from another country, so I'm able to […bring] that to the forefront [of teaching]' (Mercy).

Procedures and materials

This research used interviews to obtain narratives from GTAs. The aims were to move beyond conceptions of GTAs as a homogenous group, and identify confluences across how the GTAs made meaning of their particular historical, cultural and educational circumstances. The semi-structured interviews followed Brinkmann and Kvale's (2015, p. 17) concept of the Inter-View, where knowledge is reciprocally produced, 'constituted by the interaction itself, in the specific situation created between an interviewer and an interviewee'. As a white British researcher, known to my interviewees as a teacher-trainer, I uncomfortably confronted my own position of power. To address this, I sought to abide by Brinkmann and Kvale's (2015, p. 19) suggestion that power asymmetry may be reduced through equality in interpreting and reporting.

Alongside interviews, I used a drawing activity to collect data from participants. I asked each participant to sketch her classroom, and consider how activities within the classroom reflected her teaching philosophy. This revealed the influence of previous teaching and learning experiences, as well as adjustments and challenges the GTAs had faced within UKHE. I coded the interview data in NVivo12. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages of thematic analysis, I assigned initial codes, which I revisited to identify, review and define 'patterned response or meaning within the data set' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). I conducted a review of existing scholarship which suggested that key themes might be liminality in identity (Winstone & Moore, 2017), exploitation (Raaper, 2018) or difficulties in teacher-student interaction (Plakans, 1997; Borjas, 2002). However, rather than link data specifically to these themes, the initial coding was inductively attuned to the participants' terms and ideas. Liminality, challenges, and exploitation featured across many of the GTA interviews, but these co-occurred with consistently recurring discussions (for all participants) of teachers' techniques and the resources they brought to the classrooms. Whilst NVivo12 facilitated hierarchical coding of data, and searching for co-occurrence, it was nevertheless important to follow hunches about themes in the data (MacLure, 2011), emphasizing that which elicited obvious emotional reactions (laughter, tears, swearing, banging on desks).
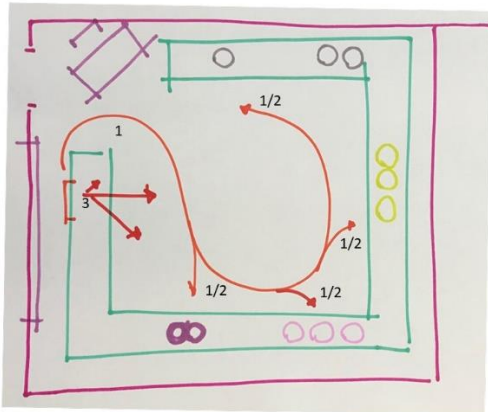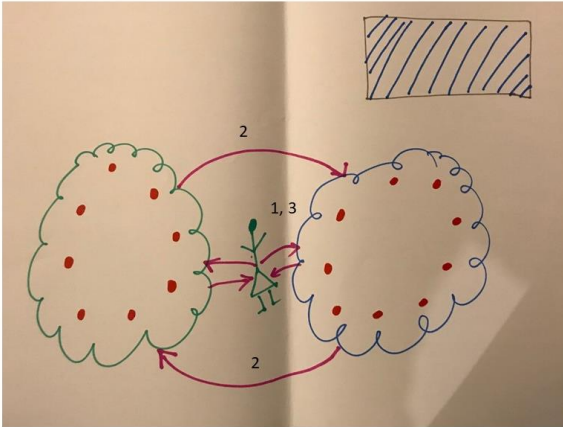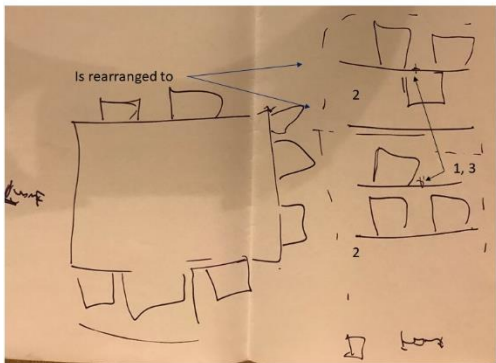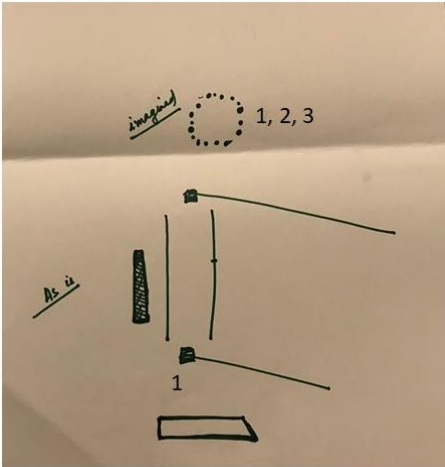
Results

Table 1 details the codes discussed by each participant. These codes are numbered so they can be identified in the drawings below. From these initial codings of manifest content from participants' transcripts, I identified larger the latent conceptual themes of decentred teaching and the transcultural classroom.

Table 1: Coding for GTA interviews and graphic elicitation

Code	Explanation	Example
1. Movement	Mobility aids the GTA engage the class	'when they are working I just move around and look at what they are doing […]This is typical of how I teach back home. […] I move in the class, […] because back home we have more students'. (Nneka)
2. Inclusive communities	Classroom accommodates all students working together	'The way I organise my class I think is a result of the way I look at teaching. That it should be inclusive. […I]t should make sure that it doesn't divide. […Teaching in India] you could invite the [students] to make the talk happen […] we all made an agenda.' (Amiya)
3. Teacher as partner	Breaking down hierarchy of teacher and student, decentring power	'Some seminar leaders here do not deal well seminars […] they want to […] have more authority by being teachers, I didn't have this intention at all. … [M]y strategy in seminars

		was […] looking at persons and avoiding the grand narratives.' (Tale)

(Tale)	(Mercy)
(Nneka)	(Amiya)

Cultural positioning: the body in the classroom

Movement in the classroom was key to these GTAs' perceptions of successful interaction

with students through breaking barriers. Mobility was not simply moving amongst the students or positioning the teacher within the student body for the purpose of controlling a discussion. It had an equalising function, as one participant described: 'you're all trying to figure out what you're studying. That makes a difference' (Amiya). Amiya sketched her classroom as a circle of dots (participants), with no distinction between the teacher and the students. She described how she created this in a classroom with a rectangular table by removing structural obstacles that signified difference: she moved away chairs that looked different. Every seat is equal:

> I see myself with the students, just structurally, I don't like these chairs. […] I just fancy any seat that's empty and I ask the person who's sitting beside me, are you okay if I sit here. And I sit with them.

Like Tale, Nneka illustrates how she moves into the centres of different clusters of students. This is 'typical of how I teach back home' Nneka suggests, because with multiple students, in order to be heard, 'most times I am actually in the middle of a class.' Mercy also depicts herself at the centre of student interactions, but she also depicts a 'massive block', of 'the rigidity of being behind a desk' when she needs to show lecture slides but has no clicker. Her ideal is being able to 'interact' with the students as an 'intermediary' for their ideas, as depicted in the diagram. In reality, structural impediments in her School impair this. For each of the women, being **at the centre** of the students' discussions and learning, physically and intellectually was key to creating a successful learning environment.

These sentiments echo hooks (1994, p. 153), who sees the classroom as 'a community of learners *together*'. hooks (1994 p. 138) contends:

> Liberatory pedagogy really demands that one work in the classroom, and that one work with the limits of the body […]. I remember in my early teaching days that

> when I first tried to move out beyond the desk, I felt really nervous. I remember thinking, 'This really is about power. I really do feel more 'in control' when I'm behind the podium.

This echoes Mercy's struggles with the 'rigidity of being behind a desk', not only physically, but also in terms of being able to sustain a connection with her students, suggesting confidence is key. The teacher's body, through movement, can decentralise power in the classroom. As the GTAs themselves suggested, this physical mobility, flexibility around formality, and breaking barriers in the classroom is a 'cultural positioning'. A GTA in the larger study explained 'cultural positioning' as a mixture between embodied reflexive awareness, and body techniques from past teaching experiences:

> I'm wondering where I should position myself in the classroom. […S]hould I be in the corner, should I be sitting down, should I be standing? […] what is your cultural position in the teaching and learning situation in this classroom?

These GTAs exhibit consciousness of 'cultural positioning' in the classroom. Teacher mobility is not dominance of space, but being 'with students' (akin to Paulo Freire's 'coordinator') as well as translating teaching experiences from home countries into the UK classroom.

Teacher as learning partner

Whilst these women are in the centre of their classrooms, this was 'decentred', a partnership with students. The GTAs described 'not lecturing' (Tale), 'learning from them' (Mercy), 'spearheading' whilst trying 'make myself invisible' (Amiya), or 'a guide rather than a teacher' (Nneka). Gaining the students' trust was a part of this partnership. Nneka described herself as:

limiting the formality […] so at first the students should be able to trust me, to trust that I am for them, I want to help. So that really broke down the barriers, and right now they are very free with me.

Amiya disclosed: 'I've actually been able to become friends with a lot of my students; they've been able to confide in me.' For Tale honesty about herself was key to breaking down barriers: 'my students love it [my honesty…], so when I talk about myself, they start talking about things they would never talk about probably even with their parents.' For Mercy, elements of this partnership were present: 'students come to me with questions'. However, a block occurred in her connection with her students who felt the module lacked coherence, which she experienced as a 'disconnect' from the students.

As 'student-teachers', GTAs are 'learners' as well as teachers: all the participants described themselves learning the syllabi of their modules. This echoes Freire's notion that teachers and students simultaneously occupy both roles. Furthermore, GTAs were also learning the culture. For example, Amiya disclosed 'It took me a while to understand things like terminologies in the department with the students. Stuff they said, things they meant'. But if material as well as cultural positioning is learnt, these are also shaped by previous teaching experiences: 'I am part of the conversation […]. You know I should open their eyes to things that they haven't seen' (Tale); 'teaching you how to take arguments […] I definitely brought it with me' (Amiya); 'because back home we have more students […] I developed [lecturing in the middle]' (Nneka). The GTAs' choices in the classroom were cultural, and transcultural, emphasising exchange of ideas. The GTAs perceived themselves as encouraging students to tell their own stories (Amiya, Tale), exchange ideas (Mercy), and 'chat' (Nneka). However, considering transcultural exchanges as necessarily charged by historical and geographical contexts illuminates an understanding of these GTAs' perceptions. One participant's teaching 'avoid[ed] metanarratives' (Tale), another's added a 'twist' from her home country (Mercy). The

'exchanges' took place in relation to the specific historical and educational contexts of the GTAs themselves, and in the classroom these experiences were reshaped, relationally, through exchange between students and GTAs. However, in the context of the white institution, these exchanges were not neutral or equally weighted.

Inclusive communities

Not only were GTAs partners with the students, these women worked to make students equal partners within the classroom by getting them to work together. Mercy described this in her diagram as an exchange of ideas where everyone learns from everyone else. Nneka physically moves her students into clusters that work together to 'create […] the forum for them to discuss the questions and share their understanding'. Amiya forges autonomous collaborations between her students by giving them all their own white board markers and encouraging them to contribute to brainstorming. As an 'Arab feminist', Tale's approach (from experiences of activism at home, and through her research) was to 'avoid […] grand narratives'. In part this was by eliciting students' own stories to construct the learning environment. These women all facilitated the co-construction of group learning.

As Winstone and Moore (2017, p. 495) argue, GTAs are actively involved in identity work. Consequently, teaching identity is constituted and reconstituted, within institutional expectations. One GTA operated within clearly defined structures 'We don't get to produce the content ourselves, the module convenor [does…] that' (Nneka). However, others developed their own teaching materials. Tale was the most deliberate in subverting content provided by module convenors:'[the convenor] sends seminar questions which are f*%$ing boring […But] I do some more slides, look at videos, look

at news articles, so we do a lot of stuff, not just discussing a few questions'. Mercy created her own content, based on Kenyan material, but discovered this autonomy challenged the School's expectations; Amiya was flexible with her material as she felt more scaffolding was needed for students. GTAs found subtle ways to make their own meanings within, and (partially) challenge the structures in which they are located.

Two GTAs were more explicitly resistant to institutional expectations, and identity work as a GTA emerged with their identification of this. In the study, whilst the African GTAs were less likely to deliberately engage in practices that challenged institutional conventions, the Indian and Egyptian GTAs resisted some conventions. Tale, an Arab activist, argued that her work was about 'being able to teach these students, of course in very subtle ways, to rebel'. This meant getting students to think differently: 'I tell them the very unexpected when they ask for my opinion', and even spontaneously moving the class to another location. Amiya opposed what she saw as the 'formality' of seminars: 'there are a lot of [teachers'] voices saying, I don't allow this in class [...] there need to be more saying, I'm okay with it.' She contrasted her teaching style with other GTAs, who might want to move beyond formality, but don't because 'they think they are breaking rules'. Resistance to institutional conventions also occurred outside the classroom. Amiya engaged in student groups mobilising against precarious working. However, she argued, there existed a 'non-spoken rhetoric around if you say no [...or do something wrong] it might affect your student visa.' Tale found ways round being denied a parking permit. Notably both of these GTAs underscored in their interviews that they saw GTAs as exploited.

Discussion and implications

GTAs' classrooms encourage active participation of each student. By concentrating on the experiences of four female GTAs, I have identified confluences in their teaching practices, although they taught across different subjects. Two core clusters of practice emerged around 'collectivism': 'Decentred teaching' and the 'transcultural classroom'.

Decentred teaching and resistance

Decentring of power and inclusivity were central to the collectivist perspectives of these GTAs. This can be considered in relation to: 1) their positioning within wider context of power relations within higher education globally, 2) the GTAs' experiences of their home postcolonial educations, 3) that the GTAs were positioned as both international students and international teachers within UKHE, roles that did not sit comfortably together. This 'decentring' occurred in a classroom context, where the GTAs emphasised the active role of the students. Two of the GTAs deliberately resisted norms within and outside the classroom. I see this as postcolonial practice in its opposition to dominant power relations (Heble, 2002), embedded in a racialised UKHE structure.

Winstone and Moore (2017) argue that GTA identity work involves negotiating between provisional selves, and the selves GTAs hope to become. For the four GTAs interviewed this linked to their experiences as GTAs from former colonies. GTAs were aware of their 'cultural positioning', which often emerged in discussions around working with students, or organising students in collectives, so challenging individualism (Heble, 2002, p. 153). Whilst each GTA identified embodiment in the classroom, breaking down the division between student and teacher, and classroom inclusivity as key elements in

their teaching outlook, another core element was drawing on content and teaching techniques honed in their home countries: e.g. small and large group teaching, or bringing 'Arab feminism' to the Western university. However, the GTAs underscored that the 'white' (Ahmed, 2012) institutional context nevertheless framed their work, ideas and actions: e.g. Tale joking with her students 'it's just because I'm black', Amiya highlighting 'I don't think […] the kinds of shifts I have had to make will make sense to any of my white colleagues. Right from changing the language, to how you organise yourself in the classroom'.

The transcultural classroom

These GTAs will likely be delivering internationalised curricula to diverse students, following the institution's Internationalisation Strategy that every degree programme should contain international elements through content and/or delivery. All of the GTAs used elements of their home cultures and learning experiences in their teaching, and sought to make their classrooms inclusive. This chimes with Ryan's (2013 p. 287) notion of the transcultural classroom as one in which there is reciprocity between and inclusivity within cultures, rather than monolithic cultural dominance. Whilst Ryan describes the possibility of internationalisation for learning, her term can also be usefully borrowed to understand these GTAs' perspectives on teaching. For them, the classroom represented a juncture of internationalisation agendas and global power imbalances with the lived experiences of student teacher interaction. Reframing Ryan's 'transcultural classroom' in terms of these GTAs' experiences, situates classroom transcultural 'exchange' (student to student, or student to teacher) within an awareness of different agendas and power relations cutting across the classroom, at national, institutional and everyday levels.

Implications

The postcolonial practices of these GTAs aligned, although they hailed from different countries. There were, however, some subtle contrasts: the GTAs from India and Egypt were more concerned with exploitation and resistance to institutional conventions than the GTAs from sub-Saharan Africa, who talked about what they bought to the University from their cultures (teaching content and teaching technique). The kinds of identity work these two pairs of GTAs carried out were slightly different. Furthermore, those who explicitly articulated where they resisted or opposed institutional conventions were more likely to link their activity and attitude in the classroom to their stance in their postcolonial country: e.g. Tale was an 'Arab feminist' activist, and saw herself bringing this into her classroom; for Amiya 'because I come from Indian universities that are recognised […] I could sense what exploitation means'. Educational cultures were also important: for Indian and Egyptian GTAs their educations were in contexts where hierarchies or teacher-focused teaching were important, yet discourses on decolonisation had aligned 'democratisation' and pedagogy (Sharma & Mir, 2006; Ginsburg and Megahed 2008).

The evidence from this research strongly suggests that far from international GTAs being homogenous, GTAs from former colonies should be examined as a discrete group. These results suggest that GTAs may be developing postcolonial pedagogies. More work is needed on how different home cultures impact on how GTAs develop their identities. However, it is clear that far from being a 'deficit' in need of instruction, these GTAs bring experiences, styles and content from their home countries to the classroom, actively and creatively developing teaching practices to collapse barriers between themselves and students.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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