

Understanding culture's impact on learning and teaching

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a critical lens to explore the relationship between culture and education, emphasizing how cultural norms, learning approaches, and teacher roles shape educational systems. It investigates how cultural beliefs and practices influence knowledge transmission, student learning processes, and teaching methods. By analyzing cultural norms, the research demonstrates that education is not universal but deeply rooted in sociocultural contexts, shaping what is valued as knowledge and how it is acquired. The study further examines learning as a culturally situated phenomenon, arguing that educational approaches must adapt to diverse cultural backgrounds to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness. Additionally, it explores the evolving role of teachers as facilitators who bridge cultural gaps, promote responsive pedagogy, and empower students to take ownership of their learning. By integrating cultural and educational perspectives, this research highlights the importance of adaptable teaching practices in fostering equitable and meaningful learning experiences. The findings contribute to broader discussions on educational reform, advocating for strategies that respect and integrate cultural diversity in classrooms worldwide.

Keywords: education and culture, cultural norms, learning approaches, teacher roles, culturally responsive teaching, knowledge transmission, cross-cultural education, Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural influence on learning.

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INTRODUCTION

This study offers a critical viewpoint for understanding how cultural norms, teaching strategies, and teacher duties impact educational systems across different countries. Recent research has emphasized the significant influence of culture on instructional methods, knowledge transfer, and student engagement. For instance, Lee (2025) highlights that cultural mismatches between home and school environments can hinder academic achievement, underscoring the need for teaching approaches that bridge these gaps. Building on such insights, this study explores the relationship between cultural beliefs, educational practices, and teacher-student dynamics, providing a thorough analysis of how cultural diversity shapes learning and instruction. The findings contribute to broader discussions on equitable and inclusive pedagogy, advocating for systemic reforms that prioritize cultural adaptability in global classrooms.

Statement of the problem

This study aims to explore how cultural beliefs and norms influence educational practices by examining the ways in which cultural norms shape knowledge transmission, student learning, and teaching methods. It seeks to understand learning as a culturally embedded process and how education can be adapted to diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, the study investigates the role of teachers as cultural mediators who promote culturally responsive pedagogy and encourage student ownership of learning. Through this analysis, the research intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of culturally informed teaching practices and their impact on educational outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design, drawing on data mining techniques to explore how culture influences learning and teaching. Instead of generating new empirical data, the research systematically collected and reviewed a wide range of scholarly articles, ethnographic accounts, and educational reports to identify patterns in how cultural norms shape classroom practices, knowledge transmission, and the roles of teachers. This approach allowed for a broad yet in-depth investigation of existing evidence, prioritizing interpretative depth and thematic exploration over quantitative measurement. By relying on thematic analysis, the study identified recurring insights into culturally responsive pedagogy and situated these findings within diverse cultural contexts.

The population of this study consisted of published works in the field of anthropology of education and cross-cultural pedagogy, carefully selected to ensure both relevance and representation across multiple regions and cultural systems. Through purposive sampling, the researcher concentrated on sources that directly addressed cultural norms and their influence on education. This deliberate selection ensured that the materials analyzed were not only academically credible but also reflective of the varied cultural perspectives that shape global education. The research locale, therefore, was not bound to a single geographical site but encompassed a cross-continental perspective, examining contexts from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. By situating the analysis in this broad landscape, the study captured both universal patterns and culturally specific adaptations.

The primary instrument employed was a researcher-constructed matrix designed to organize and code findings from the reviewed literature. This tool facilitated the identification of key themes, such as the impact of cultural norms on knowledge transmission, student learning approaches, and the roles teachers assume in culturally diverse settings. The coding process followed systematic procedures to ensure consistency, with themes compared across different cultural settings to draw meaningful conclusions. To strengthen validity, the study employed triangulation by synthesizing insights from multiple sources, thereby reducing the influence of any single perspective or bias.

Data gathering was conducted through a comprehensive review of journal databases, books, and credible online publications. The researcher ensured that the sources were current, authoritative, and directly related to the study's objectives. Ethical considerations were observed by properly acknowledging all intellectual contributions, adhering to citation standards, and ensuring transparency in the use of published materials. Since the study relied on secondary data, issues of participant consent were not applicable, but academic integrity and respect for intellectual property were prioritized throughout.

The process of data analysis involved categorizing and interpreting findings through thematic grouping. Cultural influences on education were classified under key domains such as knowledge transmission, student learning processes, and teaching strategies. Themes were then compared across diverse cultural contexts to highlight both commonalities and differences. This comparative analysis allowed for a nuanced interpretation of how culture shapes education globally, while also providing practical implications for classroom practice. The presentation of results was carefully structured to flow from broad cultural influences to specific teaching and learning practices, ensuring that the narrative remained coherent, comprehensive, and academically rigorous. Ultimately, the methodology ensured that the findings were not only grounded in existing research but also synthesized into a cohesive analysis that contributes to ongoing discussions about culturally responsive education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The presentation of findings is arranged thematically, beginning with an exploration of how cultural norms shape the transmission of knowledge, followed by an analysis of how students' learning approaches are influenced by cultural values, and concluding with the evolving role of teachers as cultural mediators. Each theme is supported by direct examples from across continents, providing a comparative perspective that reveals both universal patterns and context-specific adaptations. The interpretation connects these patterns to broader educational challenges, showing how cultural awareness can be used to reduce disparities in learning outcomes. Ultimately, the synthesis of findings points toward practical recommendations for implementing culturally responsive teaching, thereby demonstrating how anthropological insights can guide the creation of more inclusive and effective educational environments. This structured yet accessible approach ensures that the analysis tells a coherent story while upholding academic rigor.

Cultural norms are central frameworks that define classroom dynamics, shape knowledge distribution, and influence instructional practices. They establish standards for how knowledge is transmitted, what is considered valuable, and who is authorized to teach. These norms also govern

student participation and learning patterns, reflecting deeply embedded societal ideals. For instance, in Ghana, the Akan people rely on oral storytelling and communal learning practices, treating knowledge as a collective heritage rather than an individual possession. Elders serve as custodians of wisdom, using narratives, proverbs, and performance arts to instill moral lessons and historical consciousness in the younger generation (Asante, 2013). This collective orientation contrasts with Western education models, which typically emphasize written texts and individual achievement. Similarly, the Tsimane people of Bolivia structure learning pathways along gender, age, and skill divisions. Traditional subsistence skills such as hunting and farming are transmitted vertically from parent to child, while modern skills like literacy are acquired horizontally through peer interaction (Lew-Levy et al., 2017). These examples illustrate how cultural norms maintain social order by regulating knowledge transfer.

In Greece, multicultural classrooms demonstrate the tension between national education policies and diverse student backgrounds. Teachers often attempt to bridge gaps through interactive and project-based strategies; however, many lack the training to address intercultural complexities effectively (Vitsilakis-Soroniatis, 2020). This gap underscores the importance of incorporating culturally responsive practices into teacher education. In the United States, the pursuit of global competence often sidelines localized and community-based knowledge systems. Standardized curricula typically prioritize dominant cultural narratives, leaving little room for minority perspectives, which calls for policies that integrate students' cultural capital (Banks, 2017). Taken together, these cases confirm that knowledge transmission is profoundly shaped by cultural norms, which determine not only what is taught but also how it is taught and valued.

Just as norms shape knowledge transfer, they also directly influence how students learn. In Japan and China, learning is grounded in respect for authority, standardized testing, and rote memorization, emphasizing collective achievement over individual expression (McFeeters, 2021; Hofstede Insights, 2023). Finland and Norway, by contrast, prioritize equity, student autonomy, and well-being, often minimizing homework and granting teachers flexibility in instruction (Sahlberg, 2015; OECD, 2023). In the United States, the cultural emphasis on individualism promotes critical thinking, creativity, and extracurricular learning opportunities (Hornick-Lockard, 2021). Conversely, China's collectivist values highlight group success over individual advancement, while Kenya integrates communal learning traditions with mobile technology to bridge infrastructural gaps in education (World Bank, 2021).

Other countries reflect similar cultural adaptations. In Saudi Arabia, school schedules are adjusted during Ramadan to accommodate religious practices (UNESCO, 2022). In Brazil, family-centric cultural practices shape schooling, such as midday lunch breaks at home (Educational anthropology, n.d.). These variations emphasize that learning is not universal but rather shaped by cultural expectations, societal norms, and values. Hierarchical societies such as Japan and China foster discipline and memorization, while egalitarian ones such as Finland and Norway emphasize autonomy and well-being. Collectivist contexts like Kenya and China encourage group-oriented learning, while individualist contexts like the U.S. foster personal expression. Ultimately, schools that align learning processes with cultural values, whether through flexible schedules or technological adaptations, are more likely to achieve inclusivity and effectiveness.

Cultural norms also strongly influence how educators teach. In Nigeria, oral traditions and communal learning are central, reflecting indigenous systems of knowledge (Disciplines.ng, 2024). Australia has integrated Indigenous knowledge into its mainstream curricula, embedding

local ways of knowing within formal education (Future Education Magazine, 2024). In the United States, educators increasingly emphasize culturally responsive teaching that adapts instruction to diverse student needs (Lee, 2025). In Sub-Saharan Africa, teachers often accommodate gendered expectations, demonstrating how classroom practices are shaped by societal norms (Enterprise Wired, n.d.). Japan's hierarchical and collectivist traditions reinforce group harmony, consensus-building, and respect for authority in teaching styles (FasterCapital, 2025). These examples underscore the importance of embedding cultural competence in teacher training, as educators who are sensitive to cultural dynamics are better able to create inclusive and effective learning environments.

Learning itself is best understood as a cultural phenomenon. In the United States, classrooms highlight personal achievement and critical thinking, but this can disadvantage students from non-Western backgrounds, leading to calls for culturally responsive approaches (Lee, 2001). By contrast, Samoa relies heavily on observation, imitation, and informal socialization, as documented by Margaret Mead (1928). Japan reflects collectivist cultural traditions through group harmony and cooperative learning (Yamazaki, 2005). Post-apartheid reforms in South Africa embody Ubuntu philosophy, promoting communal values and interconnectedness in education (Hattam et al., 2009). Indigenous communities in Mexico emphasize experiential, land-based education, while Afro-Brazilian communities sustain cultural identity through storytelling, music, and oral traditions (Amanti et al., 2008; Alim & Paris, 2017). India's gurukul and apprenticeship systems further illustrate the value of mentorship and oral transmission in learning (Spindler, 2000). These diverse approaches reveal that schooling is only one of many valid ways of acquiring knowledge, and that decolonizing education requires embracing non-Western epistemologies.

Education systems worldwide also respond to cultural backgrounds with varying effectiveness. In the United States, culturally responsive teaching improves minority student outcomes but systemic inequities persist (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In the United Kingdom, multicultural policies exist, but schools still reproduce dominant values while marginalizing immigrants and working-class students (Levinson & Pollock, 2011). China has created bilingual programs for ethnic minorities, but globalization threatens traditional knowledge systems (Chen, 2003). Singaporean education reflects Confucian parental expectations that often conflict with students' aspirations, requiring teachers to mediate between cultural tradition and individual autonomy (Swami, 2024). In postcolonial African nations like Kenya and South Africa, efforts to decolonize curricula face resistance, with Eurocentric models still dominating despite attempts to integrate indigenous knowledge (Dar & Najar, 2018). These cases illustrate that while reforms are underway, systemic challenges such as globalization, institutional rigidity, and generational divides hinder the realization of fully responsive education.

Teachers are critical agents in bridging cultural realities with formal schooling. They serve as cultural mediators, advocates of culturally responsive practices, and facilitators of student agency. In Spain, EFL teachers explicitly cultivate intercultural competence as part of their pedagogy (Sercu et al., 2004). In Australia, reflective practices help language teachers promote intercultural understanding (Kohler, 2015). In the United States, Latinx educators leverage their identities to counter marginalization and bridge gaps between school and home cultures (Barreto, 2023), while in Italy, teachers and textbooks function as cultural ambassadors, supporting intercultural exchange and soft diplomacy (Dolci, 2021). These cases emphasize the necessity of

systemic support, such as training in intercultural competence and institutional recognition of diversity.

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) further demonstrates the transformative power of pedagogy that integrates cultural perspectives. In the United States, CRT involves linking curriculum content to students' cultural experiences and capital, using strategies such as activating prior knowledge and contextual learning (Burnham, 2024). In Hawai'i, 'āina-based learning centers Indigenous knowledge systems, connecting science instruction to ecological practices like taro farming (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2023). In Italy, intercultural mediation supports immigrant integration but is hindered by inadequate training and institutional backing (López et al., 2019). Across Canada, CRT has shown measurable success, including a 44% increase in math performance when students' lived experiences were incorporated into word problems (Prodigy Education, 2021). These findings demonstrate that while CRT is promising, its success requires systemic reforms such as professional development, policy support, and curricular flexibility.

Finally, teachers encourage students to take ownership of learning by fostering agency and autonomy. In India, process-oriented approaches like reflective exercises help students develop metacognitive skills (Culanth.org, 2017). South African reforms prioritize collaborative and decolonized pedagogy that emphasizes student voice (RAI, 2023). In the U.S., horizontal classroom practices such as circle discussions and community agreements empower marginalized learners (MILPA et al., 2023). Israel has advanced self-directed learning models supported by digital tools and flexible pacing, significantly improving autonomy and outcomes (Zach et al., 2018). Similar approaches in clinical science programs highlight lifelong learning benefits, with peer influence and curricular design as crucial elements (Alotaibi et al., 2025). These strategies reveal a global shift toward treating teachers as facilitators of learning rather than sole transmitters of knowledge.

Overall, the findings illustrate that culture acts as an invisible blueprint shaping education. Ghana's storytelling traditions and Japan's group learning challenge the idea of a single "correct" teaching method, while examples from Hawai'i and the U.S. demonstrate the power of culturally responsive practices in bridging classroom and cultural contexts. At the same time, systemic challenges such as inadequate training, rigid policies, and inequities persist. Crucially, when teaching methods align with students' cultural contexts—whether through India's process-focused approaches or Israel's self-directed learning models—students become more engaged and take greater ownership of their education. The evidence suggests that schools must move beyond token gestures toward diversity and instead embrace cultural diversity as a core principle of pedagogy, ensuring that education respects local traditions while preparing learners for participation in a globalized world.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that culture is not merely a background element in education but lies at the very heart of how teaching and learning unfold. The findings reveal that cultural values shape nearly every aspect of the educational process, from determining which subjects are considered important to influencing how lessons are taught, how teachers and students interact,

and how success is ultimately defined. Across diverse contexts, the most effective education systems are those that respect and integrate students' cultural backgrounds while simultaneously equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in a globalized world.

The evidence makes it clear that achieving meaningful education goes beyond making minor adjustments to accommodate cultural differences. Instead, it requires a fundamental rethinking of teaching methods, lesson plans, and even school structures. Teachers play a pivotal role in this transformation. They can either serve as bridges who bring students' cultural knowledge and experiences into the classroom or, if unprepared, unintentionally exclude them. When schools genuinely embrace cultural perspectives—as seen in Indigenous teaching traditions or in student-centered approaches—learners demonstrate stronger engagement, greater ownership of their education, and improved, more equitable outcomes.

These insights have significant implications for practice and policy. They challenge the assumption that schools should adhere to a uniform, rigid model of instruction and instead argue for flexible, community-rooted approaches that honor diversity. They also underscore the necessity of teacher preparation programs that emphasize cultural awareness and provide educators with the skills to connect classroom learning with students' lived realities. True equity in education does not emerge from forcing students to adapt to a standardized system; rather, it arises when institutions are reshaped to value multiple ways of learning and knowing.

In an increasingly interconnected world, cultural diversity should not be viewed as a barrier but as one of education's greatest strengths. The future of learning rests on systems that allow students to remain rooted in their cultural identities while also developing as global citizens. Such systems ensure that learners see themselves reflected in their education, fostering both belonging and preparedness to engage with the broader world.

Building on these conclusions, several recommendations emerge. Schools should actively incorporate local knowledge and traditions into curricula, as seen in Hawai'i and Ghana where storytelling, environmental learning, and community wisdom enrich instruction. Collaborating with elders and local experts can make education more relevant and meaningful to students' lives beyond the classroom. Teacher training must also be restructured to provide hands-on experience in diverse communities, with opportunities to work alongside cultural mentors who can guide new educators in understanding local contexts.

Assessment practices likewise require rethinking. Standardized examinations often fail to capture the full scope of student learning. Alternative approaches, such as project-based tasks and authentic assessments used in Finland and Canada, allow students to demonstrate knowledge in ways that align with their strengths and cultural backgrounds. Similarly, technology can be leveraged to bridge educational gaps, but only when it is thoughtfully adapted to local conditions. In Kenya, for example, mobile-based lessons have successfully reached learners with limited access to formal schooling, showing how technology can be both practical and culturally responsive.

Perhaps most importantly, schools must engage closely with the communities they serve. Education becomes more relevant and sustainable when parents, families, and community leaders participate in shaping both content and delivery. Regular opportunities for dialogue and

collaboration ensure that schools remain responsive to local needs while strengthening ties between institutions and the communities they support.

These changes should begin incrementally through pilot programs in areas of greatest need, with successful approaches scaled over time. The overarching goal is clear: education should affirm the value of every child's background while preparing all learners for participation in a diverse and interconnected world. By reimagining curricula, teacher training, assessment, and community partnerships, schools can become spaces where cultural diversity is celebrated as an asset and every student is empowered to succeed.

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