CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO CULTURAL LITERACY STUDIES IN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Traditional approaches to cultural literacy have always emphasised the importance of a shared (national) imagined community, achieved through engagement with traditional media and the cultural canon. This approach has often been based on problematising the growing deficit of cultural knowledge and has stressed the importance of this deficit at both individual and societal levels. Transformations in contemporary society challenge us to rethink what can or should be considered relevant or valuable knowledge about culture and the arts. A systematic literature review of research articles published from 2016 to 2023 was conducted to analyse educational approaches aimed at developing cultural literacy. The purpose of this study was to explore trends, patterns, and individual differences related to the study of cultural literacy in the educational domain. After content analysis of 412 abstracts of articles containing the keywords "cultural literacy", "cultural competence" in the Web of Science database, 32 articles were identified that described an approach or a technique to improve the overall understanding of cultural literacy. The analysis highlighted key models of cultural literacy including dialogic practices, intercultural education, sociocultural theories, and critical analysis of cultural structures, as well as key skills such as critical thinking, cross-cultural awareness, self-criticism, and reflection necessary for successful interaction in today's multicultural world. These findings highlight the importance of revising and adapting educational strategies to take account of increasing globalisation and cultural diversity, and the need to develop cultural literacy as a key component of contemporary education.

Keywords: cultural literacy, cultural competence, cultural awareness, tertiary education, cultural skills, cross-cultural learning, intercultural interaction.

Introduction

Globalisation has given rise to a new discourse calling us to seek renewed educational solutions for 2024. Even the briefest analysis of global trends of increasing international interconnectedness, rapid urbanisation, technological progress, growing migration and depletion of natural resources makes it evident that labour markets are increasingly demanding individuals with a range of new skills. All this has led to changes not only

in the economic, social, and technological spheres, but also in people's mindsets and the way they interact with the world around them. In our increasingly interconnected world, one of the most important tasks of educators and institutions at all levels is to develop, promote and enhance cultural literacy. With the rise of a national populist movement, the relevance of cultural literacy may be questioned.

Because many of today's challenges are unique and do not quite have analogues in the past, educational institutions face complex problems of adapting their graduates to new life realities in a transdisciplinary and transcultural environment. It is crucial for an educational institution to provide their students with a set of skills that will provide them with mobility and flexibility to operate effectively in different cultural and professional environments.

The objective of this systematic literature review is to rethink the debate on cultural literacy and critically examine a number of interrelated perspectives of its development to summarise the general trends in the development of a new set of skills needed to foster cultural literacy in today's realities.

Literature analysis

In this systematic literature review, the author presents the current state of research on cultural literacy. The review addresses the definitions of the concept, its evolution, areas of application, indicators used to measure cultural competence, and methodologies used in the educational field.

Historically, literacy as an ontological phenomenon has been traced back hundreds of years and has been defined differently because of political and social changes in society. In the 18th and 19th centuries, industrialised European countries made some progress in reducing illiteracy and increasing the overall literacy rate, but in the middle of the 20th century the literacy rate increased dramatically (Shliakhovchuk, 2021). The term "cultural literacy" appeared in the 1940s and meant the ability to understand a particular society or culture, familiarity with the customs and characteristics of the culture (Oxford English Dictionary). In 1974, an attempt was made to broaden the term, which sounded already as the ability to work effectively with people who are culturally different and to demonstrate the skills required to do so (Wilson, 1974).

In 1987, E. D. Hirsch published his monograph "Cultural Literacy. What Every American Needs to Know" where he outlined the basic tenets of his theory (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1987). Hirsch's theory of cultural literacy was based on the idea of core knowledge that he believed was necessary for everyone to participate equally in society. Hirsch argued that national language and culture should be recorded in school textbooks and dictionaries, and should be used in millions of books, magazines, and newspapers (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1987). Thus, a unified cultural literacy would ensure social and economic equality, as opposed to multilingualism, which is extremely dangerous for civil society and increases cultural fragmentation, civic antagonism, illiteracy, and economic technological inefficiency.

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Hirsch's work triggered a broad scholarly debate criticising the notion of core knowledge and the assumption that everyone has access to it (Johnson, 2014). For decades, scholars and educators have attempted to redefine the notion of cultural literacy giving it new meaning. Most agreed that there are too many different cultures for a person to be literate in all of them. In other words, people are fluent in their home culture because they learn it tacitly and often unrealised from childhood. However, when an individual enters a new culture or interacts with its members, they need to acquire a new set of cultural literacy skills (Geertz, 1973; Sule, 2021).

Subsequently, cultural literacy has been redefined and since 2000s, the perception has been articulated that culture is no longer an obstacle to be overcome, but rather a tool for competitive advantage (Rosen, 2000). Intercultural literacy was defined as "the understandings, competencies, attitudes, language abilities, participation, and identities that enable effective engagement with a second culture" (Heyward, 2000). The concept of transnational literacy was first elaborated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article "Teaching for the Times" (Spivak, 1992). This notion is consistent with the ideas of decolonial thought, and according to Spivak, it is transnational literacy that allows us to recognise that we are hearing the voices of people previously deprived of rights or unable to make their voices heard.

All these issues reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept of cultural literacy, which involves deep engagement with diverse perspectives, enabling individuals and societies to harness cultural diversity as a source of innovation, creativity and strategic advantage. This rethinking requires an educational paradigm that not only recognises cultural complexities, but actively incorporates them into curricula and social practices, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Methodology

In order to achieve the above-mentioned objective of the study, a systematic literature review was conducted. A primary keyword search was conducted to identify all scientific articles and research papers published between 2016 and 2023 in the Web of Science database. The keywords used for the search were: "cultural literacy", "cultural competence," which resulted in 412 articles. To further narrow down the most relevant material for analysis, a qualitative review of all annotations was conducted, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria described below were developed.

Exclusion criteria
- Articles describing other types of literacies (other than cultural literacy).
- Articles on early child literacy.
- Articles on elementary school education.

Inclusion criteria
- Open access articles.
- Articles written in English.

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- All articles related to cultural literacy concepts.
- All articles related to teaching/learning strategies for cultural literacy, and approaches that can be summarised and/or reproduced.

Purpose of the search

- To define the concept of cultural literacy, identify its core components, and trace its evolution, highlighting key stages of its development.
- To study and evaluate pedagogical methods, educational strategies, and approaches for developing cultural literacy, including the influence of globalization on these practices.
- To analyze the role and impact of cultural literacy within the educational process, and compare approaches across different countries and cultures.
- To evaluate the tools and methods used to assess cultural literacy across various populations, and explore its relationship with other forms of literacy, such as media, information, and language literacy.

Results

After qualitative analysis of all articles containing the keywords "cultural literacy", "cultural competence" based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, 32 articles were identified corresponded to the inclusion criteria. As a result of the analysis of approaches to the study of cultural literacy, the following groups of ideas and concepts of cultural literacy were identified:

- Models of cultural literacy (articles on cultural literacy and clarification of some conceptual ideas related to this notion, such as changes in the interpretation of the concepts – literacy and cultural literacy, rethinking the idea of cultural literacy) – 4 articles.
- Skills necessary for cultural literacy and new approaches to the implementation of cultural literacy in education in the contemporary context – 28 articles (skills – 12 articles; new approaches – 16 articles).

Models of cultural literacy

In an era of globalisation and increasing intercultural interactions, cultural literacy is becoming a key component of modern educational systems. It encompasses not only awareness of cultural diversity, but also the ability to interact and co-operate effectively in different cultural contexts. Various models of cultural literacy have been developed, each offering a unique perspective on the development of this skill. These models help structure the necessary knowledge and skills for intercultural communication and offer methods to help build cultural competence. The study of these models highlights key principles and approaches that can be used to promote cultural diversity and inclusion in educational settings.

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Maine, Cook, and Lähdesmäki (2019) discuss the concept of cultural literacy as a dialogic practice focusing on developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to interact successfully with people from different cultural contexts. Key elements of this model include an understanding of cultural differences, intercultural communication skills and openness to new perspectives. In this context, cultural literacy is understood as a dialogical process that enhances intercultural dialogue and democratic interactions. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasises the importance of social interactions and cultural contexts in the learning process (Marginson & Dang, 2017). This theory focuses on how social and cultural contexts influence learning and development, introducing concepts such as the zone of proximal development and cultural mediation. Despite the transformations brought about by globalisation, Vygotsky's ideas remain relevant to the study of educational processes in a global context.

The transdisciplinary model underlines the integration of knowledge from different disciplines to address complex cultural and social issues. According to Rupnik and Avsec (2020), this model highlights the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and collaboration – skills that are crucial in a technologically advanced society. Their research demonstrates that a transdisciplinary educational approach significantly enhances students' ability to apply technological concepts in real-world contexts, thereby equipping them with the necessary competencies to navigate and contribute to an increasingly complex and interconnected world (Rupnik & Avsec, 2020).

Other contemporary concepts such as *intercultural literacy*, *cultural intelligence* and *global agility* reflect the desire of educational systems to adapt to the challenges of globalisation and multiculturalism. These concepts stress the importance not only of knowledge about other cultures, but also of skills to interact effectively in multinational and multicultural contexts. *Intercultural literacy*, according to Rossiter and Bale (2023) is a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for successful interaction with people from other cultures. It includes understanding of cultural differences, awareness of one's own cultural biases, and the ability to empathise and communicate interculturally (Pazio Rossiter & Bale, 2023).

Cultural intelligence, in turn, is the ability to adapt to new cultural contexts and to interact effectively with people whose cultural values and norms differ from your own. This includes cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects that help an individual to successfully integrate into cross-cultural contexts which becomes especially important for leaders working in international or multicultural teams (Caputo et al., 2019). Meanwhile *global agility* involves the ability to adapt flexibly to a variety of cultural and professional contexts, enabling successful functioning in different cultural contexts (Caligiuri, 2023). It includes not only the ability to adapt quickly, but also a proactive approach to learning and adopting new cultural models and approaches.

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Skills necessary for cultural literacy and new approaches to its implementation in education

Classical approaches to building cultural literacy skills focused on the national component and were achieved by reading books or any other interaction with the traditional code, a phenomenon that later became known as the "literacy myth" (Rutten, 2020). Recently, there has been a growing body of research that critically examines the possibility and consequences of becoming 'literate', and more specifically, on whose terms and for what purposes this transition to cultural literacy takes place (Rutten, 2020). What counts as a legitimate argument when discussing the value of cultural and artistic knowledge is also inevitably linked to certain views of their societal functions. That is, we need to critically evaluate claims about the 'importance' and 'value' of culture and the arts to the individual and society, and therefore focus on the wider social context in which debates about this take place. Furthermore, we need to reconsider the institutionalised spaces in which this mediation of cultural knowledge takes place.

Culture is now seen as a driving force (along with science, technology, and innovation) for peace, security, and the creation of social, cultural, and economic inclusive environments. Some critical cultural-literacy skills can be articulated as follows:

- Cross-cultural awareness. "Paralleling" different cultural traditions, beliefs, and social systems; "parallels" rather than comparisons increase cultural literacy.
- Local cultural awareness. Accepting and respecting the knowledge within local cultures is the pre-requisite in the development of cultural literacy.
- Critical reflection and thinking. The need for self-critique, self-reflection, or reflection on the trajectory that society is taking.

Researchers are developing a new approach to cultural literacy with a broader range of *interdisciplinarity* that criticises so-called 'traditional' cultural literacy practices in the classroom that rely on a centre of disciplinary knowledge (Ochoa et al., 2016). These studies propose new principles for developing cultural skills, knowledge, and abilities through intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration and emphasise the importance of experiential learning and reflection as meaningful practices of cultural literacy. Emphasis is placed on the importance of funds of knowledge and lived experience as a way of reimagining education, which help to provide a pedagogical foundation for culturally sustainable practices where students and faculty can create and critique co-created curricula.

New learning discursive practices for preparing culturally literate individuals are constructed through dialogue and argumentation where cultural identity is collaboratively constructed and inspired by texts or visual content about core civic cultural values such as tolerance, empathy, and inclusion. In this way, dialogic learning aimed at developing cultural literacy acts as an innovative and adaptive education curriculum in different contexts. Much attention is devoted to various strategies for dealing with potential conflicts arising from cultural differences. The discussion of their applicability raises questions related to current practices in the study of cultural differences and

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current knowledge about the role of culture, cultural differences, potential conflicts, and strategies for mitigating these conflicts (Galvez-Lopez, 2023).

Recent research also considers the perspectives of the phenomenon of *culture shock* experienced by students studying in universities with a culture different from their own (Swallow & Tomalin, 2022). Students must navigate new social and educational environments, behaviors, and expectations, while also dealing with adaptation challenges common to all students. This is difficult enough when a newcomer is aware of the differences beforehand, but even more difficult when they are unaware and mistakenly believe that the new society works in the same way as in their home country. The quality of the psychological, socio-cultural and educational experiences of this large group of people is of great importance, not least for the development of global intercultural understanding.

A key consideration is also to critically rethink the internationalisation of curricula and incorporate critical reflection, which can enable educators and students not only to achieve understanding or competence in other cultures, but also to question their own normative cultural understandings (Vishwanath & Mummery, 2019). Learning and teaching in an increasingly culturally diverse environment require careful, sensitive, and proactive planning and a personalised learning approach. However, because cultural literacy studies occur within a particular period and are always specific, they are only a history of the present moment and anthropology of a current condition. We therefore need to continually explore what cultural literacies are and how they evolve in the context of a wide range of disciplinary, geographical, geopolitical, and institutional spaces.

Another essential element is *destabilisation*, a teaching strategy that stimulates a conceptual shift in students to change their views on culture, identity, and the world at large (Ochoa & McDonald, 2019). The goal of destabilisation is that students understand how they approach, both conceptually and empirically, what they do not know. How do they respond to the uncertainty and instability of new situations? The main objective of this teaching strategy is to destabilise students' perceptions of certain topics to encourage them to introspect at the most fundamental level. A significant objective of this approach is to provide students with a safe space where they can ask themselves questions to better understand themselves and their ever-changing personal and professional contexts. Not only the private conceptual shifts and reflections of a student or a group are investigated, but also the duration of study in an educational institution in relation to family characteristics of institutionalised cultural and economic capital. The theoretical basis for this analysis was Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural and economic capital, education as a field, social reproduction (Lehti & Kinnari, 2023). The authors of this study were primarily interested in whether individuals from families with high cultural capital (higher levels of parental education) could play the 'learning game' faster than individuals from families with low cultural capital (lower levels of parental education).

A number of studies mention the need for knowledge about race as an important part of cultural literacy. There is a question raised about to what extent race is visual and why it is important and how this relates to cultural literacy issues, even if it is not visualised. Thus, a study examining America as a color-blind society found that white students

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are more likely to believe they live in a post-racial era, whereas students of color continue to see race as a significant and central part of their lives. (Mueller, 2017). Another more recent study on racism in education argues that colour-blind ideology amounts to a refusal to deal with the reality of racism (Gillborn, 2019).

The development of cultural literacy therefore requires a combination of multiple skills such as critical thinking, cross-cultural awareness, interdisciplinarity, self-criticism, adaptability and communication skills. These skills are becoming an integral part of preparing professionals and citizens who are able to interact effectively in the context of cultural diversity, promoting social and cultural understanding and supporting the creation of inclusive societies. It is important to understand that cultural literacy is developed not only through educational programmes, but also through constant interaction with the world around us, through experience and reflection, which makes it a vital component of education and professional training.

Discussion

After a thorough analysis of approaches to cultural literacy learning, it is evident that cultural literacy practices are not strictly defined, but are constantly mixing and integrating with each other, which makes it not always easy to identify and make clear distinctions between them. A growing number of researchers are critically examining the possibility and implications of the emergence of cultural literacy and the conditions under which reciprocal cultural exchange between individuals and groups occurs at different levels (Rutten, 2020). This raises important questions about what it means to 'become culturally literate' and how this concept affects different forms of cultural knowledge. We can now identify common traits and skills that may indicate key elements of successful cultural literacy learning, both in an individual and in a learning environment. These are primarily self-reflection on cultural identity and understanding cultural diversity; communicative skills; avoidance of stereotypes; adjustment of one's behaviour, flexible thinking and interpersonal skills, standing against prejudice and inequality.

Globalisation has changed not only economic and technological aspects, but also our perception of cultural knowledge. This calls for a rethinking of what can and should be considered relevant cultural knowledge. Cultural institutions are therefore faced with the challenge of choosing methods that will help them to cope with the diverse challenges of a rapidly changing environment while maintaining their role in disseminating cultural knowledge. Higher education institutions, in their turn, should prepare students to live and work in a discursive postmodern transcultural environment.

It is also necessary to recognise the limitations of this study. First, many of the findings are based on generalisations of existing theories and practices, which may not take into consideration the unique contexts of individual educational institutions or cultural groups. Second, there is a need to further explore how specific educational practices influence the development of cultural literacy in different settings. It is important for future research to focus on the practical integration of cultural literacy into educational

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programs and the development of methods for assessing its effectiveness. Additionally, studies could explore the influence of cultural literacy on intercultural interactions across various professional and social settings, offering insights into its broader impact.

Conclusions

The following key conclusions can be drawn from analysing some of the debates on cultural literacy and critically examining a range of interrelated perspectives on its development. Cultural literacy is a multifaceted concept that includes the ability to understand and effectively interact with cultural differences. The main components of cultural literacy include knowledge of cultural norms, respect for diversity, and the ability to adapt to different cultural contexts. The methods and pedagogical strategies studied highlight the importance of integrating cultural literacy into the educational process. These approaches range from the introduction of specialised courses to the use of intercultural exchange and interactive educational programmes. Globalisation reinforces the need to develop cultural literacy as interactions between cultures become more frequent and significant. Analyses of different international approaches to cultural literacy show considerable variation in methods and strategies, highlighting the importance of adapting approaches according to cultural contexts.

The evolution of the concept of cultural literacy points to its dynamic development, which is linked to the transformation of educational practices and social change. The interrelationship between cultural literacy and other forms of literacy, such as media, information, and language literacy, underscores its significance in today's educational landscape. This connection highlights the necessity of integrating these skills to create a holistic approach to learning. Cultural literacy not only contributes to the reduction of cultural bias and inequalities, but also plays an important role in building sustainable, globally oriented societies. Even the smallest step towards cultural literacy in education can lead to significant gains and have a positive impact on diversity of opinion, creativity, sustainable development, a culture of peace and non-violence, critical thinking and effective contribution to society and the economy.

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