
Embracing Intercultural Trust: Cultivating Non-native Teachers' Cultural Humility in Iranian Kurdistan

Jamal Salimi
University of Kurdistan
Iran

Abdullah Azizi
University of Kurdistan
Iran

Emily N. Srisarajivakul
University of Memphis
USA

Seyedeh Asra Sajadi
University of Kurdistan
Iran

ABSTRACT: In the Iranian educational system, minoritized students often face underrepresentation in formal curricula due to racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. This qualitative study explores perspectives of non-native teachers working in state-funded K-12 schools in Sanandaj, Iranian Kurdistan. Using constructivist grounded theory, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 teachers whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differ from their students. Findings revealed four themes: (1) understanding and embracing cultural differences, (2) intercultural learning, (3) adapting teaching methodologies, and (4) building cultural trust. The study contributes to limited research on cultural humility in Iranian schools and offers insights into multicultural education in non-Western contexts.

KEYWORDS: Cultural humility, teachers, qualitative research, grounded theory, school climate.

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Diversity in educational contexts is regarded as an asset to student learning outcomes (Alim & Paris, 2017; Bardach et al., 2024; Paris, 2012). However, the reality in many communities is that students of minoritized groups often face significant underrepresentation, discrimination, negative stereotypes, and lack of inclusion, leading to increased feelings of not belonging in school and reduced educational outcomes compared to their high-status peers, necessitating the creation of an inclusive school climate to promote their academic success and retention (Cavanagh et al., 2014; Mburu, 2022; Misco, 2018; Moreu et al., 2021). Central to creating this climate are teachers who may be required to develop new skills to effectively facilitate learning in increasingly diverse classrooms (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020). As Jones (2004) asserts, many teacher education programs struggle to adequately prepare future teachers to effectively address the diverse student populations they will encounter in their classrooms (e.g., Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Rychly & Graves, 2012). Consequently, there is increasing pressure on teachers to offer quality experiences with diverse populations, worldviews, and positionalities that serve to equip their students with cultural skills and knowledge, enabling them to understand and appreciate cultural similarities and differences (Keengwe, 2010).

Developing teachers' intercultural awareness can be achieved through promoting key concepts such as cultural competence (Sue, 2001), cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), and reflective practice. Among these, cultivating cultural humility, a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation, self-critique, and addressing power imbalances (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), is essential for creating respectful and inclusive learning environments for all students (Lund & Lee, 2015). Although cultural humility has been extensively theorized within medical and healthcare contexts (Foronda, 2020; Foronda et al., 2016; Owen et al., 2011; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), its systematic adaptation into pedagogical theory and educational practice remains in its early stages. Moreover, while existing research has begun to document intellectual and cultural humility within teacher–student relationships (Brown et al., 2016; Clark & Sharma, 2021; Lembit & Burgess, 2024; Lund & Lee, 2015; Srisarajivakul et al., 2023), little is known about how humility is enacted within pedagogical relationships under sociopolitical constraints, particularly in non-Western or politically restricted schooling contexts. This gap highlights the need for deeper conceptual and empirical exploration of cultural humility in education. Ultimately, cultural humility represents a vital practice for fostering inclusive and equitable educational environments. Yet, despite growing scholarly attention, most studies in this area have been conducted in Western contexts such as the United States, Canada, and Europe (Foronda, 2020; Lund & Lee, 2015; Marshall & Khalifa, 2018), where

democratic schooling structures and institutional support for pluralism shape the ways humility is theorized and practiced.

This study is the first to explore cultural humility of teachers in Iran. Through conducting in-depth individual interviews with teachers, the implications of this study have the potential to inform the development of strategies to enhance teacher cultural humility in Iran. By documenting how Persian-language teachers in Iranian Kurdistan negotiate their work with Kurdish students under conditions of cultural and political constraint, this research both addresses an underrepresented geographic and cultural context and extends the theoretical boundaries of cultural humility beyond Western framings. Because several neighboring Islamic countries share similar educational structures and demographic characteristics with Iran, such strategies to enhance cultural humility could be generalizable to other cultural contexts.

Cultural Humility and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Cultural humility is an ongoing process of self-reflection and self-critique, (Foronda, 2020; Hook et al., 2013; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). It is defined as "...the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the client" (Hook et al., 2013, p. 354). Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) further refined the concept by distinguishing cultural humility from cultural competence, advocating for a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and the redressing of power imbalances, particularly in the physician-patient dynamic. Some researchers argue that cultural humility should not be considered as a replacement of cultural competence, but rather as an addition to it (Fisher, 2021). Despite criticism from Danso (2018), who sees cultural humility as merely a rebranding of cultural competence, it is argued that cultural humility should complement rather than replace cultural competence (Fisher, 2021).

The Multicultural Orientation Framework, which includes cultural humility, cultural opportunities, and cultural comfort, emphasizes continuous self-reflection and recognition of power imbalances among helping professionals (Srisarajivakul et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2018). Cultural humility involves several key attributes: openness to diverse perspectives, self-awareness, egolessness by viewing others as equals, supportiveness in interactions fostering positive exchanges, and continuous self-reflection and critique (Foronda et al., 2016). When such conflicts arise, individuals have three choices: 1) applying cultural humility, leading to positive outcomes like lifelong learning, empowerment, and respect; 2) being culturally ambivalent, which ignores diversity and power imbalances, leading to dissatisfaction and disengagement; or 3) being culturally destructive, actively discriminating against others, resulting in severe negative outcomes like marginalization. The model underscores the importance of cultural humility to achieve positive outcomes in a diverse world.

Apart from the medical realm, cultural humility also has been advocated for in education. According to Brown and colleagues (2016), developing cultural humility in teacher candidates involves combining experiential and classroom learning, promoting reflective practice, and engaging in critical reflection to transform attitudes and enhance self-understanding as culturally competent educators. Empirical research highlights the significance of developing cultural humility in educational settings, demonstrating its positive impact on both teachers and students. For instance, a study by Srisarajivakul et al. (2023) indicated that Black students who perceived their teachers as culturally humble reported more trust in their teachers than their White peers, and boys perceiving lower cultural humility felt more alienated from their teachers than girls. Similarly, Lembit and Burgess (2024) reflected on the role of non-Indigenous Australian teachers in supporting Indigenous education, emphasizing that, despite structural constraints, these teachers can enact relationality by building respectful relationships, centering place-based knowledge, and weaving Indigenous concepts into curriculum to more authentically include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews. Moreover, Ortega and Coulborn (2011) introduced training programs for child welfare workers from an intersectional cultural humility perspective, resulting in more culturally sensitive and effective practices. These studies collectively emphasize the importance of self-reflection, openness, and continuous learning in fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment. They indicate that promoting cultural humility fosters cultural awareness (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) and professional growth (Lund & Lee, 2015) among teachers. Being culturally humble has also been associated with feeling valuable and empowered, engaged in learning (Clark & Sharma, 2021), empathetic, and appreciative of student diversity (Ivory et al., 2016). Taken together, holding a culturally humble stance can lead to the construction of social knowledge grounded in mutual respect and shared experiences, what Moll et al. (1992) and González et al. (2005) call funds of knowledge. It highlights how students' home and community experiences constitute rich cultural assets for learning. As Roe (2019) demonstrated, when teachers intentionally learn from students' families and communities, they create more inclusive and engaging learning environments that promote belonging and self-concept. Similarly, Pérez-Isiah (2021) emphasized that embracing the cultural capital and lived experiences of students of color not only enhances equity and access but also strengthens their academic identity and success.

Aspects of cultural humility in education align with culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). This is a framework and educational approach that focuses on: 1) teacher cultural competence in communication; 2) the centrality of caring and culturally-informed relationships; and 3) teacher reflection on their own potential biases, sociopolitical (critical) consciousness, as well as other important teacher-related competencies in the areas of academic and social-emotional success. The key aim of CRP is to facilitate the appreciation and celebration of diverse student cultures in the classroom (Gay, 2000). One review demonstrated that using CRP may improve academic achievement for both White students and minoritized students, as it challenges teachers to carefully consider the way they interact with

their students and their potential biases when planning activities and projects around student culture (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). While cultural humility is not currently a formal component of CRP, it has been theorized that it is an overarching virtue that could aid teacher interactions with students if students broach topics of culture or if discussions or activities involving culture emerge in the classroom (Lund & Lee, 2015). By being open towards parts of students' cultures that are unfamiliar, asking appropriate questions, and reflecting on their potential biases, teachers could utilize both cultural humility and existing CRP techniques to improve teacher-student relationships and classroom management (e.g., Srisarajivakul et al., 2023).

Transformative Learning Theory

Complementing cultural humility, transformative learning theory encourages critical reflection and discourse, which can lead to significant changes in an individual's cultural perspectives by challenging and transforming their existing beliefs and assumptions (Mezirow, 1997). Extending this perspective in a more comprehensive context, Elias and Mansouri (2023) argue for a critical transformative approach to intercultural education in Australia, demonstrating that policy initiatives alone are insufficient and that long-term, systemic strategies are required to disrupt exclusionary discourses and promote inclusivity. Brookfield (2017) underscores that, for teachers, this theory is crucial in fostering a reflective practice that not only enhances their pedagogical skills but also promotes an inclusive classroom environment. Cranton (2006) further highlights that transformative learning enables teachers to critically examine their own biases and assumptions, leading to more culturally responsive teaching practices. Ultimately, this ongoing internal transformation is essential for fostering genuine understanding and respect in intercultural interactions.

Transformative learning theory aligns closely with the principles of cultural humility (Foronda et al., 2016), emphasizing critical self-reflection and challenging societal norms, where learners question their own assumptions and embrace diverse perspectives (Mezirow, 1997). In this way, transformative learning theory mirrors cultural humility's call for openness, continuous self-reflection, egolessness, and mutual empowerment (Foronda et al., 2016). By viewing others as equals and fostering supportive interactions, both transformative learning theory and cultural humility appear to be robust approaches to promoting respect and strengthening partnerships among teachers, students, and families. Ultimately, the integration of these theories with cultural humility fosters lifelong learning, mutual empowerment, and optimal care in professional and educational settings (Foronda et al., 2016).

Cultural Context

This study takes place in Iranian Kurdistan. The Kurdish population in Iranian Kurdistan represents a significant ethnic group with a rich linguistic and cultural heritage; yet, they face substantial challenges due to historical and ongoing oppressive political, social, and educational policies. For example, Kurdish language education is forbidden in Iranian schools. Kurdish is a macro-language with at least five dialect groups: Northern Kurdish (Kurmanji), Central Kurdish (Sorani), Southern Kurdish (Kirmashani/Faili/Kalhuri), Zazaki, and Gorani/Hawrami, which belong to the northwestern branch of Iranian languages, a subgroup of the Indo-Iranian family (Sheyholislami, 2015). In addition to the Kurdish population, schools in Kurdistan often serve a diverse student body that includes speakers of other languages such as Turkish, Persian, Baluchi, and Arabic. In Iranian Kurdistan, this diversity highlights the critical need for intercultural awareness in education, where teachers must be supported to be developed to effectively address the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of their Kurdish students.

The literature on developing cultural humility in teachers highlights a significant gap within this particular cultural context: the lack of empirical studies specifically focusing on the unique cultural dynamics and educational challenges in regions like Iranian Kurdistan. Teachers in this region must navigate these complexities to foster an inclusive and respectful learning environment for all students. Due to the influence of dominant state language and assimilationist policies towards cultures other than Persian, however, attention to and development of a nuanced understanding of cultural differences in the local educational context is often lacking. Additionally, researchers argue that the Iranian educational system persists in enforcing a cultural model that erases the languages and cultures of Iranian ethnic groups (Havas Beigi et al., 2018). For example, Kurdish culture includes a variety of traditional music, dance, clothing, and festivals that differ significantly across regions. The traditional Kurdish dance, known as "Dabke" or "Halparke", varies in style and form among different Kurdish communities, reflecting local histories and cultural exchanges (Hassanpour et al., 2012). These traditions are forbidden in schools due to religious dogmatism. Also, Sadeghi (2012) highlights various obstacles to cultural education in Iran, such as the difficulty of creating a multicultural curriculum free from bigotry, racism, and ethnocentrism.

These factors are reasons to explore the cultivation of cultural humility in various ways among teachers in Iranian Kurdistan. In addition, Article 15 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979) indicates that the teaching of regional and tribal literature is permitted in schools, but not the Kurdish languages themselves. However, anecdotally, there are those who voluntarily and discreetly engage in cultural activities in schools and strive to pass on the value of the region's language, traditions, and customs to the next generations. Overall,

enhancing cultural humility among teachers may create a more equitable and enriching educational experience for students in Iranian Kurdistan.

Current Study

This study aims to develop culturally humble teaching practice, practical strategies, and frameworks for integrating cultural humility into teacher education curricula specific to the context of Iranian Kurdistan. It is already known that cultural humility is essential for effective teaching in diverse settings, as it promotes continuous self-reflection and the recognition of power imbalances (Foronda et al., 2016; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). However, Iran's educational system is centralized and enforces Persian culture and language in a mandatory and compulsory manner. It makes intuitive sense that fostering open-mindedness and cultural humility within the school context might allow teachers to create welcoming classroom environments for their diverse students.

Methodology

This grounded theory study aims to explore teacher attitudes, behaviors, and perspectives of non-native teachers working and educating children in Iranian Kurdistan, with a focus on finding evidence of cultural humility among teachers in this area. Qualitative research can provide researchers with a nuanced understanding of cultural humility and its impact on teachers and students within this specific educational context. While Iran is a country rich in cultural diversity, multiculturalism is not widely reflected within the national curriculum. Examining the role of teachers as micro-level educational practitioners is essential for preserving students' cultural and linguistic heritages.

Participants

This study involved 11 teachers who were not native to Iranian Kurdistan. All participants were working at public, state-funded K-12 schools across Sanandaj, Iran and had relocated to the area for personal or occupational reasons. These teachers, who came from the dominant cultural group in Iran, brought with them cultural perspectives that differed significantly from those of their Kurdish students who belong to a minority group within the country. This dynamic created a context where exploring cultural humility was particularly relevant. The demographic information of participants is displayed in Table 1, below.

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Degree	Educational Levels	Job experience (Years)
1	female	29	MA	secondary school	4
2	male	33	BA	elementary	6
3	male	35	BA	high school	7
4	male	33	BA	elementary	7
5	female	38	MA	elementary	10
6	male	32	MA	secondary school	5
7	female	28	BA	secondary school	5
8	male	35	BA	elementary	10
9	male	39	MA	high school	11
10	male	34	MA	high school	6
11	female	30	BA	elementary	5

Given that this study was conducted in Sanandaj, where most teachers and students share a Kurdish linguistic and cultural background, the researchers, in collaboration with the provincial Department of Education in Kurdistan, obtained a comprehensive list of non-native teachers across this region whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differed from those of the students, ensuring the relevance of cultural humility to the study. This approach allowed for an examination of more features of cultural humility from the perspective of teachers who are culturally distinct from their Kurdish students. Also, one of the main reasons the researchers selected this group of teachers was that cultural humility, based on the definition provided by Tervalon and Murray-García (1998) as “a commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another’s culture but begins with an examination of her or his own beliefs and cultural identities,” is best manifested in contexts where the culturally humble individual encounters a culture different from their own. Recent studies have followed this logic; for example, in American contexts, the concept has often been applied to diverse educational settings (Haynes-Mendez & Engelsmeier, 2020; Mergen et al., 2021; Slaton et al., 2023). The same principle applies in Kurdistan, where Kurdish teachers typically possess a strong sense of attachment to their own culture and language. Consequently, instances of cultural humility rarely emerge when teachers and students share the same cultural background. Therefore, the most appropriate participants for this study were non-native teachers who experienced cultural difference in their interactions with Kurdish students.

Data Collection

This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method to investigate strategies for fostering cultural humility among teachers in Sanandaj, Iran. The semi-structured interview format was selected due to its ability to balance flexibility in questioning with a structured approach, allowing participants to express their unique viewpoints and experiences. A sample of the interview questions covered in this study are presented below:

1. How would you describe the current school climate regarding respect for cultural diversity and inclusion?
2. Can you give an example of a time when you learned something new about your students' cultural backgrounds that influenced your teaching?
3. Can you describe some class activities or strategies you use to learn more about your students' cultures and experiences?

In addition to the three core interview questions listed above, we also used probes and follow-up questions to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses and provide concrete examples. Each interview was conducted face to face or via a phone call due to participants' availability; interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes depending on the participant's availability and willingness to share and, in two cases, a second short follow-up interview (20–30 minutes) was conducted for clarification. This ensured sufficient depth and richness of the data beyond the initial guiding questions.

The researchers specifically chose individuals with relevant teacher experience who could discuss the phenomenon under investigation (deMarras & Lapan, 2003). According to Creswell (2007), selecting appropriate interview candidates is crucial, and researchers should employ specific sampling strategies to recruit qualified volunteers who can provide the most reliable information. Creswell (2007) also emphasizes the need for participants who are open and willing to share their experiences or "stories." Therefore, the present study employed purposeful sampling to properly locate non-native teachers across schools in Kurdistan. After receiving approval from the researchers' university institutional review board, the researchers obtained a comprehensive list from the provincial Department of Education of non-native teachers across Kurdistan whose cultural and linguistic backgrounds differed from those of the students.

The sample size (N=11) was guided by theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation occurs when no new data emerge that add significant insights to the categories and concepts being developed, and the researcher recognizes that the themes are sufficiently elaborated and well-defined (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017); after 11 interviews no new codes emerged. This number is consistent with grounded theory studies, which typically range between 10 and 30 participants (Charmaz, 2014).

Data Analysis

Grounded theory is a systematic method used in qualitative research that focuses on generating theory from data. It begins with the collection of inductive data and relies heavily on comparative analysis, wherein data collection and analysis occur simultaneously (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Charmaz (2016), this approach allows researchers to develop emerging categories by making conjectures and constructing hypotheses, which are then rigorously tested against the data.

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) emphasizes the importance of participants' experiences, beliefs, and values, suggesting that theory should be grounded in the realities and perspectives of those being studied (Charmaz, 2006). CGT was chosen as the framework through which data were analyzed due to its inherent flexibility, which allows the research process to evolve as new insights are gained (Charmaz, 2017). Also, this constructivist version of grounded theory "propels our thinking forward in unanticipated ways and subsequently sparks new understandings of experiencing and redressing injustice" (Charmaz, 2017, p. 9). Because this study aims to investigate ways to promote multicultural pluralism and thus uplift the voices and experiences of minoritized groups, CRT provides a robust framework for addressing the educational injustices prevalent within this educational setting.

Two doctoral students at the University of Kurdistan comprised the coding team (the second and fourth authors of this manuscript). Both identified as Kurdish; one member identified as a male and the other as female. During the initial coding stage, the researchers identified 130 codes. Each interview was coded in its entirety before proceeding to the next, which aligns with Charmaz's (2006) guidance, until 100% consensus was achieved on all codes. In the focused coding stage, these categories were synthesized further, with relationships between them identified through constant comparison methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which revealed 12 focused codes. The final stage, theoretical coding, integrated these refined codes into a framework of four broad categories: understanding and embracing cultural differences, intercultural learning, adapting teaching methodologies, and building cultural trust. This process relied on continuous engagement with the data, consultation of relevant literature, and input from doctoral-level experts (the first and third authors of this manuscript) to specify relationships among the categories (Charmaz, 2006).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in grounded theory research is achieved by addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. Credibility ensures accurate representation of participants' experiences through strategies like member checking and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability

relies on rich descriptions to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts (Geertz, 1973), while dependability focuses on process consistency via audit trails (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Confirmability ensures data-grounded results by minimizing bias through reflexivity (Patton, 2015). Authenticity promotes fairness and inclusion of diverse perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

While it is challenging to fully incorporate all criteria of trustworthiness in a single research study, this study managed to effectively address some key aspects. Credibility was affirmed by employing strategies like member checking, where participants reviewed and validated the interpretations of the researchers' codes, and peer debriefing, which involved discussions with colleagues to reduce biases and ensure accurate representation of the data. Confirmability was achieved by maintaining a transparent audit trail, documenting every step of the research process, and practicing reflexivity, where the researchers continuously examined and acknowledged their own potential biases. We incorporated reflexivity throughout the research process by keeping reflective journals, engaging in regular team discussions, and using peer debriefing sessions to critically examine our assumptions. These practices helped us identify potential biases, question our positionalities, and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' voices.

To further minimize potential cultural bias, the coding conducted by the Kurdish doctoral students was closely supervised by the third author, a U.S.-based researcher in cross-cultural psychology, whose external perspective provided critical oversight and strengthened the confirmability of the findings. A review of the themes from the data was also conducted with the first author, a doctoral-level expert in Kurdistan, Iran, who reviewed the themes for clarity and interpretability. Finally, authenticity was demonstrated by fostering fairness and ensuring that diverse perspectives from participants were included and represented in the findings, thus capturing a wide range of experiences and viewpoints within the study's context.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed strict ethical standards, ensuring participants' rights and well-being. Detailed information about the study was provided, and informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing personal identifiers and using unique participant pseudonyms. Data was securely stored using password-protected, cloud-based storage systems to ensure participant confidentiality. Efforts were made to minimize risks and discomfort by informing participants that they had the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. This research received ethical approval from the first, second, and fourth authors' university.

The first author, a Kurdish senior faculty member in Iran has long engaged with education in a multilingual region. His institutional experience and

commitment to equity informed his interpretations and shaped the study through a reflexive awareness of cultural and political complexities. He served an advisor and primary mentor to the Iran-based coding team.

The second author, a Kurdish PhD student in educational administration with a background in curriculum studies in Iran, brought sensitivity to issues of culture, language, and marginalization. Drawing on Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory, he viewed data collection and analysis as a co-constructed process shaped by his insider–outsider role and commitment to educational justice. He served as one of the primary coders.

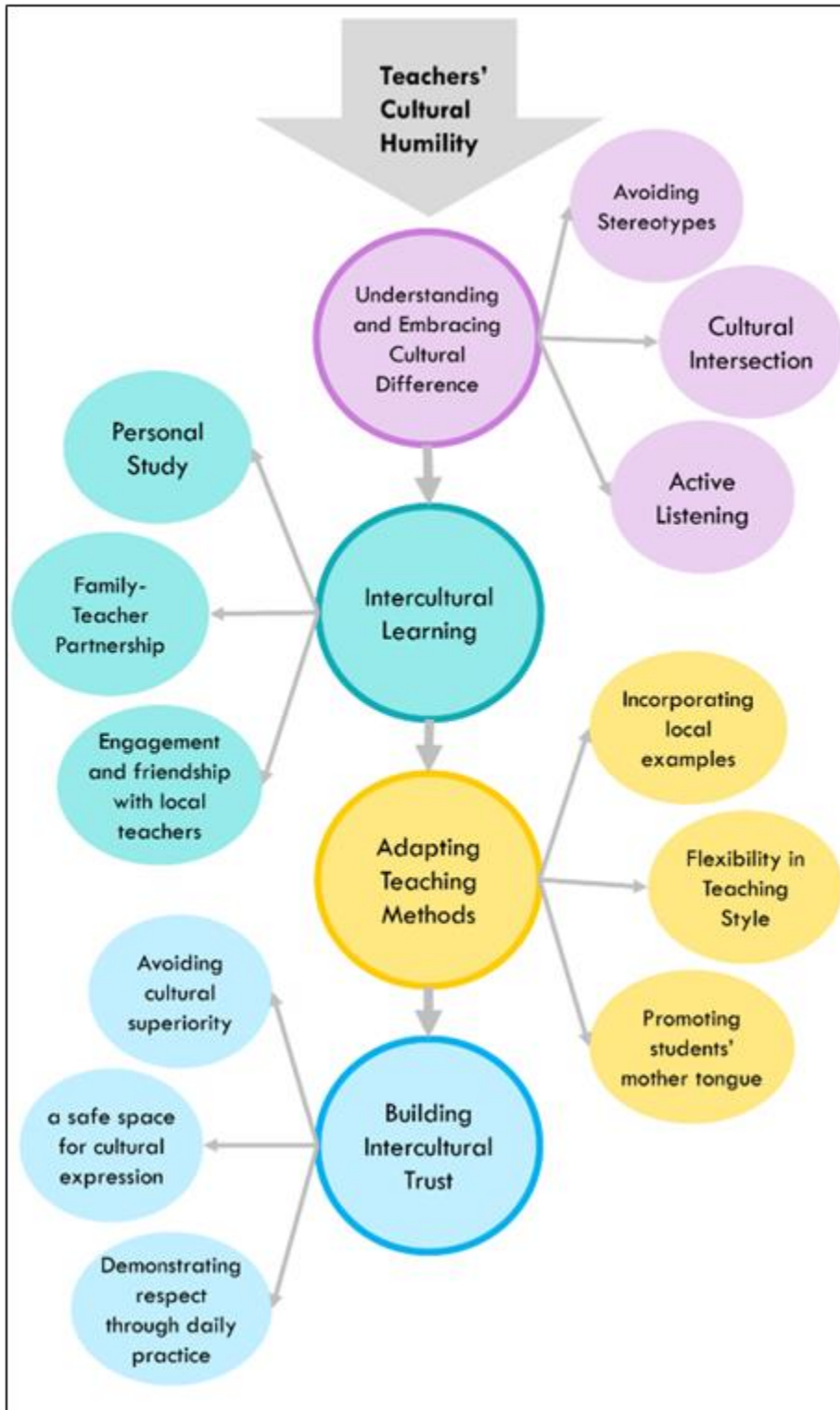
The third author, a Thai American assistant professor of school psychology and licensed psychologist in the United States, contributed an outsider perspective grounded in cross-cultural psychology. Her position provided critical distance and balance, complementing the insider understandings of the Kurdish team and enhancing confirmability.

The fourth author, a Kurdish PhD student in Higher Education in Iran and an English instructor, combined insider knowledge of local contexts with international academic training. Her dual role as teacher and researcher informed her sensitivity to issues of marginalization and her reflexive engagement with participants' narratives. She served as one of the primary coders.

Results

This study investigates the strategies employed by non-native teachers to cultivate cultural humility in their interactions with Kurdish students. Through the systematic coding of interviews, four key themes emerged: understanding and embracing cultural differences, intercultural learning, adaptive teaching methodologies, and the establishment of cultural trust. The extracted themes suggest that teachers begin by modifying and refining their worldview as a foundational step toward fostering cultural humility. Subsequently, they engage in practical strategies, such as cultivating family-teacher partnerships and cooperating with fellow teachers to enhance their intercultural competencies. Upon progressing through these stages, teachers incorporate culturally responsive practices in the classroom, including the use of students' native language and culturally relevant examples, to facilitate the teaching process. These efforts ultimately contribute to building mutual trust between teachers and students, reinforcing the effectiveness of the educational experience. The codes derived from the interviews were analyzed and categorized into four main themes illustrated in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1
Conceptual Model of Cultivating School Teachers' Cultural Humility



Understanding and Embracing Cultural Differences

Understanding and embracing cultural differences was the first theme identified in the data analysis process of the non-native teachers' experiences. This theme highlights the transformation in teachers' attitudes and skills when interacting with Kurdish students and gaining a deeper understanding of their cultural identities. One teacher, who had lived in Sanandaj for nearly six years and was struck by the complexity and richness of Kurdish culture, shared the following account:

During my first year of teaching, I assumed Kurdish was a single, simple dialect and that all students shared the same cultural and linguistic style. Curious, I asked a friend from Sanandaj about it, and he invited me to his school in Naysar. Visiting his class astonished me—the students spoke in diverse dialects: Orami, Kalhori, and even Shkak, the latter sounding more like the Urmia region.

Such understanding has helped teachers move away from stereotypical and one-dimensional views of their students and recognize their intersecting and complex identities.

Some teachers admitted that they initially assumed Kurdish students were primarily inclined toward arts, such as Kurdish dance and music (e.g., Halparke and Gorani), and only had mastery over Kurdish cultural elements such as language, due to common stereotypes. However, over time, teachers discovered that Kurdish students' talents in fields such as science and mathematics were equally remarkable. For instance, one teacher, who described herself as a blogger and had been teaching for nearly ten years, reflected on how she realized the erroneous beliefs she had absorbed about Kurds from Instagram:

Before coming to Sanandaj, I had seen Kurds in the media portrayed as if they only loved to dance and wave—what they call Chopi, sing all the time, or just listen to music loudly in nature. After coming here, I found that there are lots of knowledgeable intellectuals in math, literature, etc.

This shift in perspective has helped teachers view their students' potential with greater openness and accuracy, appreciating their diverse abilities beyond stereotypical representations

Active listening has also been one of the key skills employed by teachers in their interactions with students. One teacher shared an experience about an initiative called the Local Curriculum Program, which was held weekly in schools. He recounted:

I had a student whose family had migrated from a remote village in the Oraman region to Sanandaj about three years prior. I remember one time in class, this student said, "Every session, I want to explain how Klash—a type of traditional shoe made by the Orami-speaking people—is crafted." I was genuinely delighted by his enthusiasm and told him, "Of course, you must

come and talk about it in every session.” When he heard this from me, he laughed so loudly and leapt with excitement.

This anecdote illustrates how active listening and the importance of students' voices not only foster motivation but also help create meaningful and joyful learning experiences. Ultimately, these experiences demonstrate how teachers, by shifting their perspectives and strengthening their intercultural skills, have been able to establish relationships based on respect and trust with their students. Moving away from prejudices and actively listening to students' voices have enabled teachers to gain a deeper understanding of Kurdish students' culture and identity. These changes have not only improved teaching quality but have also had a positive impact on the personal and professional growth of the teachers.

Intercultural Learning

Persian-speaking teachers shared extensive insights on the theme of intercultural learning, identifying it as one of the most effective approaches for developing their cultural humility. They believed learning about other cultures to be among the simplest ways to become more familiar with and closer to their students' culture. First, many teachers engaged in personally studying aspects of Kurdish culture to gain a deeper understanding of the Kurdish language, history, and traditions. For instance, a teacher who previously taught Persian literature in Tehran spoke passionately about his interest in Kurdish books:

There's a book center in Sanandaj called Ezzati, filled with Kurdish and even Persian bookstores. The first book I bought was *Zara* by the Kurdish author Mohammad Qazi. It was written in Persian but filled with cultural and historical traditions of the region. I shared a part of the story with my students—a tale about a shepherd in love, set in a village near Mahabad. They were completely engrossed, and the atmosphere in the classroom was amazing.

These self-initiated efforts have not only enhanced the teachers' cultural awareness but also helped them build stronger connections with their students.

Cultivating family-teacher partnerships has also been an effective strategy for intercultural learning. Many teachers have used formal and informal visits as well as individual conversations with students' families to better understand local values and customs. For instance, a teacher whose father had served in Sanandaj as a military officer, originally from Hamedan, and who had lived in a neighborhood in Sanandaj for nearly seven years, shared:

Let me tell you something interesting. I've been teaching at a school here for three years now. One day, a student's father called me and said, “We want to buy a tablet for our child. Could you come with us and help us choose the right one?” When I hung up, I felt so happy and thought to myself how much trust they have in me.

This experience suggests that cultural and linguistic differences between the teachers and the local community did not prevent a lack of trust between them. Another teacher added, "Talking to parents helped me understand why some students place such high importance on learning their mother tongue. They expect the school to respect this as well." These interactions have not only strengthened teachers' relationships with families but also deepened teachers' understanding of the cultural and educational needs of their students.

According to participants' experiences, engaging with Kurdish-speaking teachers has been another important approach to intercultural learning. Non-native teachers have relied on their Kurdish-speaking colleagues to better understand intercultural sensitivities and awareness. One teacher, who described having several close Kurdish friends whom they initially met online, shared:

I have several Kurdish friends here. At least three times a month, we go out together for leisure activities, like spending time at gardens or similar places. When we stay overnight, we play games. There's a game called *Jorab Bazi* [sock game] in Kurdish, and it's so much fun—it's something unique to the Kurds, and we play it together.

Another teacher said:

I teach in a village near Sanandaj. Some nights, I stay in the village. Two young men from the village are also teachers and are studying for their master's in psychology. Whenever I stay, they come to see me, and we have long conversations [on local customs].

Still another teacher shared:

Before coming here, I never realized how important a tradition like *Shaw Chila* [Yalda Night, the longest night of the year] was for Kurdish students. They even skipped school the next day because of this celebration. Last year, on Yalda Night, I visited one of my students' homes. Together, we read a poem by a famous Kurdish poet about this night.

These collaborations have enabled non-native teachers to adopt more effective methods for interacting with their students, enhancing their cultural understanding and teaching practices. Overall, personally studying Kurdish culture, facilitating family-teacher partnerships, and having friendships with local Kurdish teachers have been the three main pathways non-native teachers have sought to create a more inclusive environment for their students and enhance the quality of their teaching. These experiences have not only improved the quality of education but also strengthened the connection between the school and the diverse local community.

Adapting Teaching Methods

Non-native teachers strove to revise their teaching methods to adapt to the cultural dynamics of the classroom. Adaptive teaching is generally considered a

balance between instruction and the individual tendencies of students regarding their abilities, motivations, and linguistic backgrounds. According to Azizi et al. (2024), adaptive teaching involves modifying instruction on both macro and micro levels through adjusted teaching methods. However, many teachers believed that even though Kurdish cultural elements are minimally reflected in the country's formal curriculum at the macro level, the teachers still do their best to revive their students' Kurdish culture and language, which have not been formally taught in schools for several decades. The teachers also noted that some non-native teachers who, along with their Kurdish colleagues, voluntarily engaged in cultural activities both inside and outside the school, were questioned by the provincial Ministry of Education, since engaging in Kurdish cultural activities in schools is technically forbidden.

In the present study, the participating teachers generally sought to adapt their teaching methodologies to align with the cultural backgrounds of their students, particularly within the classroom setting, where they had greater autonomy and flexibility. One English teacher, who also conducted private language classes alongside school teaching, shared a noteworthy experience:

I introduced an English book titled *The Royal Family* to help students learn English. In the first session, I asked them to name a prominent family from Sanandaj, and one mentioned the Zia'eddini family, known for their art and sculpture. I used this family to explain the relationships in the book, which made the lesson highly engaging and effective.

Another teacher, who taught social studies at a high school in the outskirts of Sanandaj, shared an example from one of their lessons:

For example, when teaching the concept of 'division of labor' [cooperation], I used the preparation of *Kalaneh*, a traditional Kurdish dish, as an example. I explained that one person makes the dough, another gathers herbs, and someone cooks it on the *Saj*. Each person's role contributes to the shared goal, which helped students grasp the concept quickly.

This approach demonstrates how teachers strive to connect the learning environment with students' real-life experiences and cultural contexts, enhancing both engagement and understanding.

Flexibility in teaching styles has been another strategy employed by teachers to establish stronger connections with their students. One teacher shared her experience:

At first, I thought my usual methods were sufficient, but when I noticed that students responded better to local music and folklore, I decided to incorporate these tools more frequently. For example, once, while explaining moral concepts, I narrated a story, Kurdish Shirin and Khosrow, and I saw how deeply the students connected with it.

This flexibility has enabled teachers to adapt their teaching methods to better align with the cultural backgrounds of their students, enhancing both engagement and comprehension.

Some teachers highlighted the importance of respecting students' heritage language or the language that they primarily speak at home and in the community. One teacher shared his experience:

In class, I asked a question, and a student responded in Kurdish. Instead of asking them to speak in Persian so I could understand, I asked the rest of the class to translate the response into Persian. I noticed that this made the students feel more comfortable. From that day onward, I even tried to learn a few Kurdish words myself and use them in my conversations.

This experience demonstrates that respecting students' heritage language not only fosters a more welcoming and inclusive learning environment but also helps boost student confidence. Overall, non-native teachers in Sanandaj have contributed to creating a more inclusive and welcoming atmosphere in schools through flexibility in teaching methods, incorporating cultural elements, and respecting the Kurdish students' heritage language. These actions not only strengthened the students' cultural identity but also fostered mutual learning between teachers and students. Such efforts reflect the teachers' dedication to bridging cultural gaps while enriching the educational experience for all.

Building Cultural Trust

According to the participants, the highest outcome of teachers' prior actions in the realm of cultural humility is building cultural trust. This refers to the establishment of mutual trust between individuals from different cultures, wherein people feel that their cultural identity, values, and beliefs are recognized and respected. Non-native teachers have consistently worked to reevaluate notions of cultural superiority, daily behavioral norms, and the overall classroom environment. A key principle in this effort has been the rejection of cultural dominance. Many teachers have acknowledged the need to challenge their own assumptions and stereotypes about Kurdish people. One teacher, who described themselves as a formerly staunch Pan-Iranist (i.e., an ideology focused on uniting all cultures in Iran under a single common culture at the expense of smaller, minoritized groups, compared to a Pan-Kurdish ideology which focuses on the political self-determination of minoritized groups such as Kurdish people) prior to teaching in Kurdistan shared:

On my first day teaching in Kalakaan, a village near Sanandaj, I wrote on the board that everyone must speak only Persian. The students complained to their parents, and the next morning some [parents] came to school to discuss it kindly. Realizing my mistake, I decided to learn Kurdish. Twice a week, I met with a young cultural activist in the village who taught me the language.

A colleague of the previous teacher elaborated on her own approach:

When I realized that my assumptions about the Kurdish language might unintentionally convey a sense of superiority, I began asking the students to teach me one Kurdish word at the start of each lesson. It helped me to remove this sense of superiority.

Another teacher shared a similar experience, explaining that, "It was very challenging for me to speak Kurdish, as I could understand Kurdish but I had to teach only in Persian. Thus, I told my students that they were welcome to ask their questions in Kurdish." Still another teacher emphasized the importance of using students' heritage language in the classroom: "Initially, some students were shy about speaking in Kurdish. However, when they saw that I not only accepted but encouraged it, the classroom atmosphere completely changed."

These actions reflect a growing awareness among teachers, promoting mutual respect and fostering an inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environment. Moreover, many teachers have recognized that respecting students' heritage language, such as allowing them to speak or respond in Kurdish, has had a profound impact on reducing the perception of cultural superiority. Some participants acknowledged that using simple Kurdish words and phrases allowed them to express their appreciation and respect for their students' culture. For instance, one teacher shared: "The first time I said, '*chonn, bashn, spass*' [how are you, good, thank you], I saw how excited my students were. They all cheered loudly in class and gave me a big round of applause."

Additionally, teachers made efforts to incorporate local celebrations and traditions, such as Nowruz (i.e., a Persian festival celebrating the Spring Equinox), into their classroom activities. An elementary school teacher recounted:

About four days before the New Year, I told my male students to wear traditional Kurdish clothing, known as *Kawa Pantol*, to our next class when we had a writing assignment. I also asked them to write an essay about Nowruz. That day was incredibly enjoyable for me and remains a cherished memory.

These initiatives not only fostered a deeper cultural connection between teachers and students but also created a more inclusive and engaging learning environment.

Teachers also encouraged students to bring their cultural experiences into the classroom through storytelling, music, or traditional arts. One teacher shared their experience:

I have a student named Shakhawan, who often sings Kurdish songs during class, lessons, or even at morning assemblies. He's sung so many songs in class that I've memorized some of them myself. For instance, he often sings this one: *khwai watan awa ke chanda shirina, dasht u sawz u rangina...* ['Oh, homeland's air, how sweet it is, with its green fields and vibrant colors'].

Teachers have also actively worked to create a safe space for students to express their cultural identities. This environment has been cultivated through group

projects and activities focused on local culture. A literature teacher shared her experience:

Last year, a group of teachers decided to take our students to Oraman to learn more about Pir Shaliar. There, the students discovered known aspects of this revered figure. For example, they learned how sacred he is to the local people, who visit the shrine to pray and seek blessings.

All of these approaches shared by teachers have fostered a stronger sense of belonging among students, enabling them to preserve and express their cultural identities with pride. Such ongoing efforts to cultivate cultural humility have not only improved teacher-student interactions but also laid the foundation for an inclusive environment where individuals feel comfortable and secure in their identities.

Discussion

This study highlights the strategies non-native teachers employ to cultivate cultural humility with Kurdish students, emphasizing four key themes: understanding cultural differences, intercultural learning, adapting teaching methods, and building cultural trust. First, teachers moved from leaning into their initial, preexisting biases to appreciating students' complex identities through self-reflection, engagement with families, intercultural learning, and adapting their instructional methods to match their Kurdish students. Their attempts to learn about Kurdish culture, incorporate local traditions, and nurture linguistic inclusivity heightened student engagement and trust. This theme of appreciating and valuing cultural differences aligns with cultural humility as developed by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998), which emphasizes self-reflection, openness, and addressing power imbalances. Teachers in this study engaged in continuous learning about Kurdish culture, language, and traditions, resembling the lifelong learning process advocated by Hook et al. (2013) and Foronda (2020). This finding also resonates with Brown et al. (2016), who argue that cultural humility in teachers is developed through experiential learning and critical reflection. By recognizing their biases and fostering inclusive educational environments, the teachers demonstrated core attributes of cultural humility, including self-awareness, supportiveness, and egolessness (Foronda et al., 2016).

The theme of intercultural learning in this study reinforces the principles of cultural humility. Teachers moved beyond rigid, traditional pedagogical models and adopted culturally responsive methods, challenging the dominant assimilationist framework within the Iranian educational system (Havas Beigi et al., 2018). Furthermore, Srisarajivakul et al. (2023) highlights the importance of fostering two-way communication and collaborating with families to create inclusive school environments. Their findings support teachers' engagement with Kurdish-speaking colleagues and families by emphasizing multilingual communication, cultural appreciation programs, and partnerships with local Kurdish organizations. Implementing these strategies can enhance trust, parental

involvement, and student success in multicultural school settings. These findings also align with the *Funds of Knowledge* framework (Moll et al., 1992; González et al., 2005), which views families' everyday experiences and skills as valuable learning resources. By engaging with parents and local communities, the teachers in this study recognized and drew upon these assets, transforming cultural humility into a reciprocal process of shared learning.

Additionally, the theme of adapting teaching methodologies resonates with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997), which underscores the role of critical self-reflection in shifting perspectives. Teachers' efforts to integrate Kurdish cultural elements into their lessons mirror the transformative learning process outlined by Brookfield (2017) and Cranton (2006). Their pedagogical adaptability aligns with previous research emphasizing the impact of cultural humility on educators' professional development (Lund & Lee, 2015) and students' sense of empowerment and engagement (Clark & Sharma, 2021). These results emphasize the significance of cultural humility in cultivating inclusive school climates, supporting continuous teacher training on the cultural groups with whom teachers work, ensuring equitable and respectful learning environments while also being consistent with and extending existing scholarship on cultural humility and transformative learning.

Finally, the theme of building cultural trust in this study contributes to discourse on the sociopolitical challenges of cultural humility in Iranian Kurdistan, where state policies frequently suppress ethnic and linguistic diversity (Sadeghi, 2012). While prior research has documented the absence of multicultural education in Iran (Havas Beigi et al., 2018), this study provides empirical insights into how teachers navigate these constraints, often relying on informal and voluntary efforts to cultivate cultural humility. Similar constraints have also been documented in other Kurdish regions, such as Turkey, where linguistic human rights are routinely denied (Sheyholislami, 2022). Like Fisher (2021), we argue that cultural humility should complement cultural competence, reinforcing the necessity of self-reflective teaching practices in diverse educational settings.

While these classroom-level strategies demonstrate teachers' agency, they must also be understood in relation to the broader structural and administrative constraints of Iran's centralized education system. Research shows that the national curriculum prioritizes Persian language and culture while systematically marginalizing minority languages such as Kurdish (Azizi et al., 2024; Hassanpour, 1992; Sheyholislami, 2015). Policies that enforce Persian as the sole language of instruction (Article 15 of the Constitution; see also Havas Beigi et al., 2018) create significant barriers for teachers attempting to integrate students' cultural and linguistic heritage into the classroom. In this context, strategies such as using Kurdish words, engaging families, or incorporating local traditions become not only pedagogical choices but also subtle negotiations with restrictive state policies (Sadeghi, 2012).

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes a distinctive theoretical contribution by extending the concept of cultural humility—largely theorized in Western educational and clinical contexts (Foronda, 2020; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998)—to the politically and culturally constrictive setting of Iranian Kurdistan, where assimilationist schooling systematically suppresses minority languages and identities. In contrast to prior research that has predominantly framed cultural humility as a linear and individualized practice of self-reflection and openness, our findings introduce a cyclical model of teachers' cultural humility that reflects the realities of educators working under conditions of cultural oppression. The model unfolds through four interrelated stages: understanding and embracing cultural differences, intercultural learning, adapting teaching methodologies, and building intercultural trust. Crucially, the model reconceptualizes intercultural trust not only as the endpoint of humility but also as the generative mechanism that reactivates the cycle, enabling teachers to sustain ongoing reflection, adaptation, and inclusive practice. This reconceptualization both resonates with transformative learning theory (Brookfield, 2017; Mezirow, 1997) and extends cultural humility theory by demonstrating its iterative, reciprocal nature in contexts of sociopolitical constraint. Methodologically, by employing constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017), the model is firmly rooted in teachers' lived experiences, thereby offering a novel, contextually grounded, and practice-oriented lens for understanding how cultural humility can be cultivated and sustained in marginalized, multilingual educational settings.

Further, this study extends scholarship on CRP (Gay, 2000) by illustrating the potential power of building relationships through intercultural trust and learning, adapting teaching methodologies based on differences in cultural communication styles, developing critical consciousness in the Iranian socio-political context, and reflecting potential teacher biases through a cyclical model of cultural humility. Each of these elements align with Gay's (2000) central tenets of CRP. First, participants shared stories about when cultural knowledge between non-native teachers and Kurdish students and families were considered a resource upon which trust and caring relationships could be built. Further, the non-native teachers' efforts to balance their knowledge of Iranian education law and policy with adjustments to teaching methods to better match the cultural context of their students is indicative of critical consciousness, as well as other techniques inherent in CRP. Crucially, the reflection of non-native teachers on potential biases through not only understanding but embracing cultural differences represents the strongest overlap between CRP and cultural humility.

The findings of this study can also be interpreted across three interrelated and complementary levels: individual, organizational, and structural. At the individual level, the results reveal that non-native teachers, through their daily interactions with Kurdish students, developed transformative shifts in their professional attitudes and practices. Through self-awareness, critical reflection, and intercultural learning, they cultivated cultural humility as an inner ethical and

reflective capacity. This study therefore provides valuable insights for teachers in other multicultural contexts, illustrating how self-reflection, attentive listening to marginalized voices, and engagement with students' lived experiences can transform educators into ethical actors and lifelong learners.

At the organizational level, our findings underscore the need to reconceptualize schools as intercultural and learning-oriented institutions. Schools can incorporate initiatives such as intercultural dialogue programs, collaborative teacher–student projects, and partnerships with families and local communities to strengthen mutual respect and cultural trust. The study demonstrates that even within restrictive political and cultural contexts, schools can serve as micro-spaces of intercultural dialogue and learning when teachers exercise professional and moral agency.

At the structural level, the results point to an urgent need for reforming national educational policies and programs toward cultural and linguistic justice. Promoting cultural humility requires systemic, top-down support through the revision of teacher education curricula, the design of professional development programs grounded in cultural diversity, and the inclusion of minority languages and heritages in the national curriculum. Such reforms can transform cultural humility from an individual moral practice into an institutional norm, contributing to the creation of a more humane, inclusive, and ethically grounded educational system.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study is its reliance on qualitative data collected from interviews with a specific group of non-native teachers in Iranian Kurdistan. While this approach provided in-depth insights into teachers' strategies for cultivating cultural humility, it may not fully capture the experiences of all educators working in similar contexts. The findings are based on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability, recall limitations, or even the tendency to exaggerate responses to gain acceptance or present oneself in a favorable light (Creswell & Báez, 2020). Additionally, the study's sample size, though sufficient for qualitative analysis, limits the transferability of the results to broader educational settings, both nationally and internationally. Future research could benefit from incorporating mixed-method approaches or combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys or classroom observations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' cultural humility practices.

One of the main limitations of this study was the difficulty in accessing relevant scholarly articles and paid databases. Due to international sanctions, researchers in Iran are unable to make international purchases, which significantly constrained access to subscription-based academic resources. Consequently, obtaining up-to-date and comprehensive literature was challenging and time-consuming. Although the university managed to provide some of the required

books and references through its library and academic networks, access to several essential materials remained limited. This restriction may have affected the comprehensiveness of the literature review.

Building on this study, future research should explore the perspectives of Kurdish students to gain a deeper understanding of how they perceive and experience cultural humility in their interactions with teachers. Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term impact of cultural humility practices on student engagement and academic outcomes. Additionally, investigating the role of institutional policies in shaping teachers' cultural humility development would provide valuable insights for educational policymakers. Expanding research to include other regions with similar sociopolitical challenges related to racial, ethnic, and cultural minoritization would further contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural humility can be fostered in diverse educational contexts.

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Author Contact

Jamal Salimi, j.salimi@uok.ac.ir

Abdullah Azizi, abdullahazizi829@gmail.com

Emily N. Srisarajivakul, Emily.srisarajivakul@memphis.edu

Seyedeh Asra Sajadi, asrasajad5@gmail.com