
Promoting and Assessing Teacher Intercultural Learning: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT: This systematic literature review examines 23 empirical studies (2013–2023) on promoting and assessing teachers' intercultural competence in five English-speaking countries. The findings identify six key approaches: Pedagogical strategies, arts-based reflection, study abroad, experiential learning, technology integration, and professional development. Most studies focused on pre-service teachers, with limited attention to in-service teachers and long-term outcomes. Assessment practices were sparse, often lacking validated, process-oriented tools. This review highlights the need for sustained, reflective, and contextually grounded approaches to both cultivating and evaluating intercultural learning, offering critical insights for teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers committed to advancing culturally responsive teaching.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural learning, teacher education, secondary teachers, systematic review

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One of the visible outcomes of globalization and migrations has been cultural diversity, which continues to shape the educational landscape. Teachers today work within multicultural environments. This makes intercultural competence a vital asset for teachers, not only for navigating their own classrooms but also for

equipping students with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to engage meaningfully across cultures. Teachers' intercultural competence includes a combination of knowledge, behaviors, dispositions, abilities, skills, awareness, and attitudes necessary to foster inclusive multicultural classrooms (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2009; Dimitrov & Deardorff, 2023; Jokikokko, 2016). A growing body of literature has underscored the imperative of teacher intercultural competence (Han & Senyshyn, 2024; Jokikokko, 2016; Ullom & Guller, 2023), recognizing that teachers who engage in intercultural learning not only strengthen their own professional practice but also create conditions for students to develop cultural awareness, respect, and appreciation (Dervin et al., 2020; Han & Senyshyn, 2024; Moloney et al., 2023). Indeed, teachers can only effectively cultivate intercultural competence in their students once they have developed it themselves (Chien, 2022; Palpacuer-Lee & Curtis, 2017).

While the terms *intercultural competence* and *intercultural learning* are frequently used interchangeably in the literature, they are conceptually distinct. *Intercultural competence* refers to the measurable outcome of having developed the ability to navigate cultural differences effectively, typically encompassing dimensions of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors (Byram, 2021; Deardorff, 2006). *Intercultural learning*, by contrast, captures the processual and developmental journey through which individuals become aware of, reflect on, and engage with cultural diversity (Han & Senyshyn, 2024). This learning process is inherently reflexive, context-dependent, and shaped by the conditions in which learning occurs (Jokikokko, 2016). This distinction carries significant methodological implications as many studies promote intercultural learning without systematically examining whether or how that learning translates into demonstrable intercultural competence.

Several reviews have examined aspects of how intercultural competence is developed and assessed, each contributing meaningfully to the field while also leaving important gaps. Romijn et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of 23 studies on professional development (PD) efforts targeting intercultural competences among pre-service and in-service teachers in primary and early childhood education settings. Their analysis found that embedded, contextual PD approaches were most effective. However, the review was limited to early childhood and primary education settings and focused primarily on the structural features of PD programs (the who, what, and how), without addressing the full range of pedagogical approaches. Jiang et al. (2021) examined online projects that used technology as cognitive tools to boost teachers' intercultural competence. Their findings identified virtual communities of practice, cross-cultural digital exchanges, and online platforms as promising vehicles for flexibility, interaction, and reflection. However, the review relied exclusively on self-reported data and did not include empirical studies with more rigorous designs.

Using the umbrella term *intercultural development*, Kang (2022) synthesized empirical studies of cross-cultural engagement among music students and teachers in K–12 and higher education contexts. He found that music teachers working in intercultural settings elicited learning outcomes related to intercultural

competence and sensitivity, musical and pedagogical understanding, and critical awareness of power dynamics. However, this review was confined to the music education discipline and did not address the broader landscape of teacher intercultural learning across subject areas. Huang et al. (2023) took a quantitative approach, conducting a meta-analysis of 16 studies on the effects of study abroad programs on pre-service and in-service teachers' intercultural competence. While this meta-analysis is valuable for establishing the magnitude and moderators of study abroad effects, it was restricted exclusively to onsite international experiences. Virtual or hybrid programs, classroom-based pedagogical strategies, or technology-mediated approaches were explicitly excluded.

Collectively, these reviews illuminate specific pathways to teacher intercultural development but fall short of providing a comprehensive synthesis across multiple approaches, contexts, and educational sectors. No existing review has systematically examined the full landscape of how teachers' intercultural competence is both promoted and assessed. Particularly an underexplored area is the question of assessment: What tools, frameworks, and methods are used to evaluate intercultural learning outcomes, and how rigorously is the link between learning processes and measurable competence established? The present systematic review addresses these gaps by offering a broader, cross-contextual synthesis of the field.

The Present Review

This systematic literature review addresses the gaps identified above by synthesizing a decade of empirical literature on both the promotion and assessment of teacher intercultural learning. While prior reviews have examined specific intervention types or educational sectors in isolation, none has simultaneously mapped the full range of approaches used to foster intercultural learning alongside the tools employed to evaluate its outcomes. By attending to both dimensions together, this review offers a more complete and integrated picture of the current state of the field. Two research questions guided the review:

1. How was teachers' intercultural learning promoted during the 2013-2023 decade?
2. What tools and methods were employed to assess teachers' intercultural learning during the 2013-2023 decade?

Drawing on a systematic analysis of empirical studies published between 2013 and 2023 (See Appendix), the review provides teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers with an evidence-grounded understanding of effective approaches to promoting and assessing intercultural learning across formal educational settings. Specifically, it synthesizes studies that examined strategies, interventions, and pedagogical approaches designed to develop teacher intercultural learning, as well as the tools and frameworks used to evaluate outcomes with a focus on five major English-speaking countries. This knowledge

is essential for designing more targeted professional development initiatives and curricula that genuinely prepare teachers to navigate cultural diversity in their classrooms.

Methodology

This review followed a protocol developed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Statement (Page et al., 2021). The process comprised four sequential stages: Establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria, searching electronic databases, screening titles, abstracts, and full texts, and extracting and synthesizing data. Each stage is described in detail below.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined in alignment with the review's objectives and research questions. Studies were included if they met all the following criteria:

- Explicitly discuss approaches, methods, or interventions designed to foster and/or assess intercultural learning among educators. This included both pre-service teachers (those enrolled in teacher education programs) and in-service teachers (practicing professionals).
- Were conducted within formal educational settings, including universities, colleges of education, K-12 schools, or structured professional development programs. This criterion ensured that findings would be applicable to structured teacher education and development contexts.
- Employ empirical research methodologies, including quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs. This ensured that the review focused on evidence-based findings rather than opinion-based or conceptual work.
- Were conducted in one of the five major English-speaking countries with the highest numbers of international students: The US, the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (UIS, 2022). This geographical focus enabled examination of intercultural learning within culturally diverse contexts that share a common language of instruction but reflect varied approaches to multicultural education.
- Were published as a peer-reviewed journal article, an academic book chapter, or a complete academic book written in English, ensuring a baseline level of scholarly rigor.

- Were published between 2013 and 2023, providing a decade-long perspective on contemporary approaches to teacher intercultural learning while yielding a manageable corpus of studies for in-depth analysis.

Studies were excluded if they were published in languages other than English, conducted in informal educational settings, non-empirical in nature, situated outside the five target countries, or focused on populations other than pre-service or in-service teachers. Together, these criteria ensured the review maintained a focused scope on empirical research directly relevant to teacher intercultural learning within formal educational settings during the specified timeframe.

Search Strategy

We developed a rigorous and comprehensive search strategy to ensure thorough coverage of the relevant literature. To strengthen the methodological integrity of this process, we consulted a university librarian who provided expert guidance regarding database selection and search term formulation. The search included five principal electronic databases: Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Education Source, PsychInfo, and Web of Science, selected for their extensive scope in educational and psychological research. These databases offered complementary strengths in indexing scholarship across teacher education, intercultural learning, and educational assessment. The searches were conducted between March and June 2025.

We organized our search methodically by using the Setting, Participants, Intervention, Comparison, Evaluation (SPICE) framework (Booth, 2004), which helped us turn our research questions into specific search criteria. Table 1 details the SPICE framework that informed our choice of keywords. By using this approach, we made sure our search terms matched our research goals and addressed the complex topic of intercultural learning in teacher education. Our main search string brought together keywords about intercultural development and assessment, and we used Boolean operators to achieve both accuracy and comprehensive results.

("intercultural learning" OR "intercultural competence" OR "intercultural education" OR "intercultural competence assessment" OR "intercultural competence evaluation" OR "intercultural competence measurement" OR "intercultural competence promotion" OR "intercultural competence development") AND teachers.

We applied this search across title, abstract, keyword, and subject fields to capture all potentially relevant studies. No language or date restrictions were applied at the initial search stage; the 2013–2023 timeframe was subsequently enforced during the screening phase. Prior to full implementation, test research was conducted in Education Source to assess the effectiveness of the search terms, identify redundancies or gaps, and refine the protocol iteratively. This process ensured the final search strategy balanced comprehensiveness with precision.

Table 1
SPICE Framework

SPICE Framework	Research Questions	Alternative Terms
Setting	Five English-speaking countries	US, UK, Canada, Australia, NZ
Participants	Teachers	Pre-service teachers In-service teachers
Intervention	Intercultural Learning	Intercultural competence Intercultural education Intercultural development Intercultural awareness Intercultural sensitivity Interculturality
Comparison	No	No
Evaluation	Promotion Assessment	promote, assess, foster, enhance, develop, support, assessment, evaluation, measurement

Study Selection

Screening was conducted using Covidence, a web-based software platform designed to facilitate collaborative screening, conflict resolution, and transparent decision-making across research teams. Authors 1 and 2 independently completed both phases of screening to ensure inter-rater reliability and minimize selection bias.

In the first phase, both authors independently screened the titles and abstracts against the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. These articles were categorized into three groups: Yes (meet the criteria), No (do not meet the criteria), and Maybe (uncertain eligibility requiring further discussion). Following independent screening, the authors compared their decisions and resolved discrepancies through discussion. Articles on which both authors agreed were categorized accordingly. Articles designated Maybe by either author were revisited collaboratively: Both authors re-read the title and abstract, discussed the source of uncertainty in relation to the specific criteria, and reached a consensus decision. No articles remained unresolved after this stage.

In the second phase, both authors independently conducted full-text reviews of all articles that had advanced from phase one, applying the same inclusion and exclusion criteria, categorization system, and disagreement resolution protocol. Articles were confirmed for inclusion if, upon full-text review, they addressed at least one of the two research questions guiding this review. The complete screening and selection process, including the number of articles

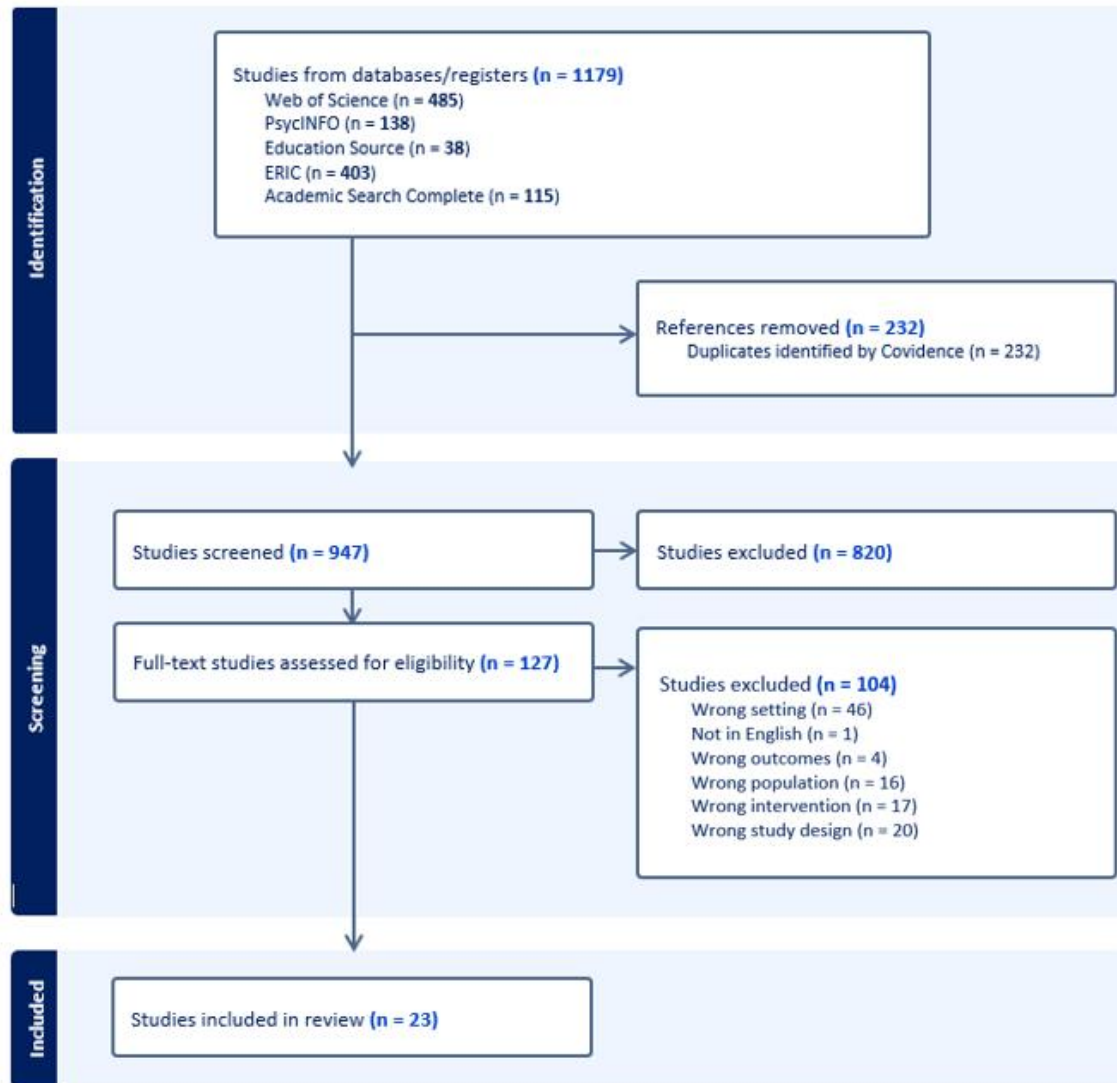
retained and excluded at each stage, is reported in accordance with PRISMA guidelines and illustrated in Figure 1.

Data Extraction

The selected studies were imported into MAXQDA v.24, a qualitative data analysis software, for systematic and transparent data extraction. Authors 1 and 2 collaboratively pilot-coded five studies together, discussing and reconciling any interpretive differences as they arose. This phase allowed the authors to develop and refine a shared codebook that defined each category clearly, established decision rules for ambiguous cases, and ensured that both authors applied the coding framework consistently.

Guided by the two research questions, the following categories of information were extracted from each study: (1) approaches, strategies, and interventions used to promote teacher intercultural learning; (2) tools and methods employed to assess intercultural learning outcomes; (3) participant characteristics, distinguishing between pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, or both; (4) research context, including in which of the five target English-speaking countries the study was conducted; and (5) key terminology used to define and frame intercultural concepts within each article, such as intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural learning, or intercultural education, given the notable variation in how these terms are used across the literature.

Following the pilot phase and codebook finalization, each author independently coded the remaining studies. The authors then cross-checked each other's extractions systematically across all included studies. Where discrepancies in coding were identified, the two authors returned to the original article, re-examined the relevant sections, and discussed their interpretations until a consensus decision was reached. This iterative process of independent coding followed by collaborative resolution ensured both the reliability of the extracted data and the interpretive validity of the finalized codebook.

Figure 1*Literature search and selection of articles for review (Page et al., 2021)*

Data Synthesis

We followed the three-stage thematic synthesis process outlined by Gough et al. (2017). The first stage, independent and collaborative coding, has been described in the preceding Data Extraction section. In the second stage, the authors compared and discussed their initial codes to identify patterns of convergence and divergence across studies. Related codes were grouped and refined into descriptive themes that captured the substantive content of the findings. In the third stage, we developed analytical themes by interpreting and interrogating the descriptive themes at a higher conceptual level. This stage

involved moving beyond what the studies reported to consider what the themes meant, what patterns were revealed, and what implications were carried for theory and practice in teacher intercultural learning. Six themes were generated after this process.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the key insights from the reviewed studies. First, we highlight the characteristics of the selected research, then discuss the intercultural competence assessment tools, and finally synthesize the evidence across six thematic areas for developing teachers' intercultural learning. Each theme is analyzed in depth, integrating discussion into contextualizing the findings within existing literature and broader implications for teacher education programs to promote teachers' intercultural learning.

Study Characteristics

We analyzed 23 systematically selected articles examining the development and assessment of teacher intercultural competence. The findings reveal that most studies were conducted in the US ($n=15$), followed by Australia ($n=5$), the UK ($n=2$), and Canada ($n=1$). In terms of participant focus, most studies focused on pre-service teachers ($n=16$), suggesting a strong emphasis on preparing future educators for intercultural competence before they enter the profession. In-service teachers were the focus in six studies, and only one study included both pre-service and in-service teachers. This imbalance points to a notable gap in research on how practicing teachers engage in intercultural development across their careers.

The key terms used to define intercultural concepts varied across studies, with some articles employing terms interchangeably or treating certain terms as subsets. The most frequently used term was *intercultural competence* ($n=13$ studies). Other terms, such as *intercultural sensitivity* ($n=4$) and *intercultural education* ($n=2$), appeared less frequently, while *intercultural awareness*, *interculturality*, and *intercultural capability* were each used in a single study. This terminology diversity reflects ongoing conceptual debates within the field and has practical implications for how intercultural constructs are operationalized, assessed, and interpreted across different studies and contexts.

Overall, these characteristics reveal that research on teacher intercultural learning remains geographically concentrated, predominantly pre-service in orientation, and largely framed through the construct of competence. While our geographical scope, focusing on five English-speaking countries, strengthened our analysis by capturing contexts with shared linguistic backgrounds, it also means that scholarship from Global South contexts is not represented. Future research

would benefit from examining more geographically diverse educational settings, attending more comprehensively to in-service teachers' intercultural development, and working toward greater conceptual clarity around related intercultural terms to support a more cohesive and cumulative body of knowledge in teacher education.

Assessing Intercultural Competence

Among the 23 empirical studies reviewed, seven explicitly assessed teachers' intercultural learning outcomes using structured tools. The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Bennett & Hammer, 1998; Hammer et al., 2003) emerged as the dominant instrument. It was employed in five studies with a range of findings. For example, while findings from Moncloa et al. (2019) and McGregor et al. (2019) show teacher intercultural competence improvement, Xu et al. (2016) noted no significant change in overall developmental scores pre- and post-intervention. These mixed results point to an important implication: The effectiveness of an intercultural intervention cannot be assumed, even when measured with a validated tool like the IDI. The contextual fit between the assessment method and the learning intervention, especially the duration, intensity, and depth of engagement, appears to critically affect outcomes.

The remaining studies relied on researcher-developed instruments. Beutel and Tangen (2018) used a qualitative questionnaire to explore teachers' self-perceptions, while Zhu et al. (2023) combined a knowledge-based exam with a scenario-based cultural dilemma task to assess intercultural communicative competence in relation to self-regulated learning. These studies underscore the importance of context-specific, multi-method assessments that go beyond static surveys and capture dynamic, applied intercultural behaviors (Deardorff et al., 2023).

The limited number of rigorous assessment tools raises concerns about the lack of standardized, theoretically grounded evaluation frameworks in teacher education. Many studies focused heavily on promoting intercultural competence without systematically measuring whether and how competence developed. This aligns with Deardorff's (2004, 2012, 2016) conclusion that most assessments of intercultural competence focus on results rather than process, and a single tool is insufficient to adequately assess intercultural learning. Therefore, a multi-method, multi-perspective approach that is focused more on the process of intercultural competence development than on an end-result should be adopted to assess intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2012; Gordon & Deardorff, 2013). This limitation reveals a research-practice gap that constrains program developers' ability to compare outcomes across programs, scale successful models, or build cumulative knowledge in the field. It also limits policymakers' and practitioners' capacity to justify investments in intercultural education based on clear evidence of impact.

Promoting Intercultural Competence

The findings are organized into six key themes, each representing a distinct approach to fostering teachers' intercultural competence: (1) pedagogical approaches and instructional strategies; (2) arts-based, narrative, and reflective approaches; (3) study abroad and international trips; (4) immersion-based learning, cultural simulations, and experiential learning; (5) use of technology such as digital platforms and virtual collaborations; (6) professional development programs and intercultural frameworks.

Theme 1: Pedagogical Approaches and Instructional Strategies

Six studies examined classroom-based pedagogical and instructional approaches to developing teachers' intercultural competence, encompassing internships (Deaton & Goering, 2020), intercultural curricula (Mercer, 2019; Szlachta & Champion, 2020), instructional practices (Nganga, 2016), multicultural coursework (Xu et al., 2016), and self-regulated learning strategies (Zhu et al., 2023). Taken together, these studies offer a varied but uneven picture of how formal pedagogical interventions shape intercultural development.

Across multiple studies, experiential learning combined with structured reflection emerged as a productive, though insufficient, condition for intercultural growth. Deaton and Goering (2020) found that pre-service teachers who engaged in guided reflection during internships developed greater awareness of diversity and more flexible teaching orientations. Similarly, Nganga (2016) reported that online discussions, field experiences, and literature-based inquiry deepened pre-service teachers' critical analysis of global issues and recognition of diverse perspectives. Szlachta and Champion (2020) extended these findings into a culturally responsive sexuality education context, where coupling self-reflection with content instruction led to measurable shifts toward ethnorelative worldviews. Mercer (2019) demonstrated that a scaffolded, multimodal curriculum, integrating active learning, teacher modeling, and Internet-based resources, supported engagement with multiple cultural perspectives. What these studies collectively suggest is that the pedagogical conditions surrounding an intervention, particularly the quality of facilitation and the depth of reflective engagement, matter more than the format of the intervention itself.

A notable contribution from this theme is Zhu et al.'s (2023) finding that self-regulated learning strategies, specifically self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and planning, were significantly correlated with intercultural competence growth. Pre-service teachers with stronger self-regulation demonstrated greater cultural awareness, social adaptability, and reduced ethnocentric biases. This points to an underexplored dimension of teacher preparation: Intercultural competence may depend not only on what experiences are offered but on whether teachers possess the metacognitive capacity to learn from them. Integrating explicit instruction in

self-regulation within teacher education programs could therefore amplify the effectiveness of intercultural pedagogies more broadly.

A critical limitation running through this theme is the predominance of short-term, bounded interventions. Xu et al. (2016) provided the clearest evidence of this constraint, finding that a single-semester multicultural course produced no significant movement in participants' IDI scores; most remained at the minimization stage, acknowledging surface-level similarities while avoiding substantive engagement with cultural differences. Deaton and Goering (2020) similarly acknowledged that reflective strategies embedded within internships require ongoing programmatic refinement to ensure their effectiveness across diverse classroom contexts. These findings collectively raise a structural concern: When intercultural learning is confined to isolated courses or short placements rather than woven throughout a teacher education program, it is unlikely to produce the depth of orientation change that meaningful intercultural competence requires.

Theme 2: Arts-based, Narrative, and Reflective Approaches

Six studies examined arts-based, narrative, and reflective approaches to intercultural competence development among pre-service teachers. The approaches varied considerably in form: Casey (2016) used structured three-perspective journaling (Her/Him, Them, Me); Catalano et al. (2021) engaged teachers in arts and community-based learning with refugee communities; Cloonan et al. (2017) employed autobiographical narrative writing through "Who am I?" workshops; Mascadri et al. (2017) applied a self-authorship framework across epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions; Varga-Dobai (2018) used a multimodal "Cultural Selfie" project combining photography, poetry, and object narratives; and Monroe and Ruan (2018) implemented the ABCs of Cultural Understanding (Autobiography, Biography, Cross-cultural Comparison). Despite this diversity of method, all six studies positioned structured self-reflection as the central mechanism of intercultural growth.

The studies collectively suggest that the structure and scaffolding of reflective activity matter more than its modality. Casey's (2016) three-perspective journaling model, for instance, guided pre-service teachers to move analytically across positions, identifying with a character, examining another cultural group, and situating themselves, producing more substantive intercultural insight than open-ended reflection might allow. Similarly, Mascadri et al.'s (2017) self-authorship framework gave teachers a conceptual architecture for interrogating their own knowing, identity, and relational assumptions. Arts-based methods added a further dimension. Catalano et al. (2021) found that creative community engagement with refugee populations generated productive discomfort, disrupting preconceptions and fostering empathy and commitment to social change. Varga-Dobai's (2018) Cultural Selfie project similarly surfaced assumptions about cultural privilege and identity that pre-service teachers had not previously examined. These findings point to the particular affordance of affective and creative

engagement in making intercultural learning personally meaningful rather than abstractly cognitive.

However, the studies also expose consistent and important limitations of this approach. Cloonan et al. (2017) cautioned that autobiographical narrative writing, while valuable, carries the risk of essentializing cultural differences and treating complex identities as fixed categories. This is a particular danger when the method is positioned as a pedagogical cure-all. More critically, Mascadri et al. (2017) found that some pre-service teachers overestimated their intercultural competence following self-reflective activities, suggesting that inward-facing reflection, without external challenge or corroboration, can reinforce rather than disrupt existing assumptions. Overall, these findings reveal a fundamental limitation of self-report and self-generated reflection as the primary evidence of intercultural learning. Without external feedback mechanisms, including peer critique, instructor analysis, and observed classroom practice, it is difficult to distinguish genuine growth from improved self-narration. This gap between reflective insight and applied intercultural teaching behavior remains an under-addressed problem across all six studies in this theme.

Theme 3: Study Abroad/International Trips

Five studies (Cushner & Chang, 2015; He et al., 2017; Lash et al., 2022; McGregor et al., 2019; Santoro, 2014) examined how international and study abroad experiences shape teachers' intercultural competence, spanning short-term trips, semester-long placements, and overseas student teaching. While the program designs varied considerably, the studies collectively raise a more pointed question than simply whether study abroad works: Under what conditions does it produce substantive intercultural growth rather than cultural tourism?

The two studies that documented the clearest gains were those with the most structured designs. He et al. (2017) found that a short-term study abroad program produced measurable improvements in culture-specific knowledge, intercultural attitudes, and teaching skills, confirmed through pre/post-program assessment. McGregor et al. (2019) reported a more consequential shift: After a semester-long education abroad program, pre-service teachers moved from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientations, developing a more critical approach to history education and a broader understanding of global pedagogical contexts. What distinguished these outcomes was not simply the duration of immersion but the degree to which participants were required to confront rather than merely observe cultural difference in their teaching practice.

Mentorship and structured reflection emerged as the critical mediating conditions across this theme. Lash et al. (2022) found that access to a cultural mentor significantly shaped how pre-service teachers processed their experiences, facilitating deeper intercultural understanding and sensitivity beyond what unguided immersion produced. Cushner and Chang's (2015) comparative

analysis echoed this result. Participants who received structured reflective prompts throughout their overseas placement demonstrated meaningfully greater intercultural learning than those who did not. Therefore, overseas teaching alone is insufficient without deliberate facilitation of reflection. This finding resonates with a broader pattern across the review: Exposure to cultural difference does not automatically generate learning from it.

Despite benefits, study abroad programs are not inherently transformative and can, at times, reinforce surface-level cultural understanding or even neocolonial perspectives if not carefully designed. Santoro (2014) found that unstructured international trips risked reinforcing stereotypes rather than dismantling them, with some participants treating the experience as a form of cultural tourism rather than professional and intercultural engagement. Cushner and Chang (2015) similarly found that, without guided critical inquiry, student reflections tended to remain at the level of surface cultural observations, such as food, dress, customs, rather than interrogating pedagogical assumptions or power relations. These findings make a structural argument that study abroad programs that lack intentional design, critical pedagogical framing, and sustained mentorship do not merely underperform. They risk reproducing the ethnocentric orientations they are intended to disrupt.

Theme 4: Immersion-based Learning, Cultural Simulations, and Experimental Learning

Three studies examined immersion-based and experiential approaches to intercultural competence development. Beutel and Tangen (2018) investigated the impact of an Engaging Diverse Learners course on pre-service teachers' intercultural development. Padua and Smith (2020) examined cultural simulations as experiential learning activities conducted within local cultural settings. McKinley et al. (2019) explored a deliberately constructed "third space," a comfortable, psychologically safe environment, as a site for identity negotiation and intercultural development among postgraduate students in the UK.

Across all three studies, structured experiential engagement produced meaningful improvement in cultural awareness, openness to diversity, and sense of intercultural community. Padua and Smith (2020) found that cultural simulations created conditions for perspective-taking that classroom instruction alone could not replicate, while McKinley et al. (2019) demonstrated that a carefully facilitated third space enabled participants to perform, negotiate, and revise their cultural identities in ways that deepened intercultural understanding. Beutel and Tangen (2018) similarly found that sustained course-based engagement with diverse learners moved pre-service teachers along the intercultural development continuum. All these studies showed that the degree to which the experiences were pedagogically contained, including bounded by frameworks, facilitation, or institutional design, gave participants conceptual tools for making sense of what they encountered. This aligns with Deardorff (2006), who argues that critical

reflection, not cultural contact per se, is what transforms experience into intercultural competence.

Theme 5: Use of Technology

Two studies explored the use of technology to facilitate intercultural learning among pre-service teachers. Carr (2016) investigated the eTutor project, in which pre-service teachers engaged in blogging, commenting, and multimedia sharing over fourteen weeks. Findings revealed improvement in intercultural attitudes, cultural knowledge, and analytical skills. Tsuda et al. (2022) evaluated the CULTURE unit (Culture Unit of Learning to Understand, Respect, and Empathize), an international online collaboration in which students exchanged videos of traditional games and engaged in guided reflection. Results showed increased openness, curiosity, and awareness of cultural similarities and differences. Both studies reported outcomes broadly consistent with Deardorff's (2006) framework, particularly the attitudinal and knowledge dimensions of intercultural competence.

What the two studies make equally clear, however, is that the platform itself produced nothing. Carr (2016) found that mere participation in the eTutor environment did not reliably generate intercultural learning. Some pre-service teachers engaged with the platform primarily to satisfy assessment requirements rather than from genuine curiosity; without instructor-guided tutorials to help them deconstruct their online interactions, gains remained shallow. Tsuda et al. (2022) similarly attributed their positive outcomes not to the technology but to teacher-guided reflection that pushed participants to critically analyze their cultural exchanges and navigate linguistic barriers. Across both studies, the pedagogical scaffolding surrounding the platform, including structured prompts, facilitated discussion, and instructor presence, was the operative condition for learning, not the digital environment itself.

The predominantly English-language architecture of most digital platforms positions certain cultural perspectives and communication styles as default, potentially privileging anglophone participants and reproducing linguistic hierarchies under the appearance of equal exchange. Both studies also acknowledge the risk that, without sustained critical framing, cross-cultural online interactions can remain at the level of cultural performance rather than engaging the power relations, historical contexts, and structural inequities that shape cultural difference. This distinction between intercultural exposure and intercultural critique is a significant gap in the technology-mediated learning literature that neither study fully resolves.

Theme 6: Professional Development

One study in this review addressed professional development as a pathway for intercultural learning among in-service teachers. Moncloa et al. (2019) designed and evaluated a multi-component organizational PD model that combined Hammer's (2012) Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), a 50-item tool measuring developmental progression from monocultural to intercultural mindsets, with Kotter's (2012) eight-step organizational change process. The model comprised four interlocking components: Individual IDI assessments with personalized feedback, customized intercultural development plans, monthly communities of practice sustained over nine months, and a two-day statewide intercultural development conference.

Participants demonstrated a measurable shift from a minimization mindset in which cultural differences are acknowledged but minimized in favor of perceived commonalities to an acceptance orientation, characterized by genuine recognition of and engagement with cultural difference. This is a meaningful developmental movement on the IDI continuum, and its significance lies not only in the outcome, but in what produced it. Unlike traditional diversity training, which typically involves discrete workshops with limited follow-through, Moncloa et al.'s (2019) model was explicitly designed for institutional embedding. Individual assessment was connected to personalized planning, which was sustained through collaborative community structures over time. The outcome suggests that it was this combination of diagnostic feedback, individualized development, and longitudinal peer engagement rather than any single component that drove the shift.

Moncloa et al.'s (2019) most important contribution to this review is not simply that professional development can work, but that it reveals the structural conditions under which intercultural competence development becomes possible for in-service teachers. While the other themes in this review predominantly focused on pre-service contexts, Moncloa et al. (2019) demonstrate that practicing teachers can achieve substantive intercultural growth when the organizational architecture supports it. This finding points to an underexplored gap in the field. The relative absence of rigorous, institutionally embedded PD models for in-service teachers, and the corresponding need for school systems and universities to invest not just in one-off intercultural training but in the sustained, multi-layered infrastructures that genuine intercultural development requires.

Cross-theme Synthesis

A cross-theme comparison shows two key interdependent components that surface as decisive conditions in teacher intercultural development: Structured critical reflection and sustained and scaffolded engagement. Reflection, as research beyond the scope of this study has highlighted, can serve as a tool for developing intercultural competence (Conway & Richards, 2018; East et al., 2022).

Our analysis showed that, for teachers, reflection must be structured and critical to contribute to intercultural development (Casey, 2016; Cushner & Chang, 2015; Deaton & Goering, 2020). Guided reflection during internships (see Deaton & Goering, 2020) and virtual intercultural exchanges (Tsuda et al., 2022), for example, supported teachers' cultural awareness and shifts in attitudes. Unstructured reflection during study abroad, however, resulted in superficial cultural observations (see Santoro, 2014). Substantial research has pointed out the need for critical and structured reflection (Jokikokko, 2016; Redfern & Bennett, 2022). These findings underscore the crucial role of structured and critical reflection in meaningfully advancing teacher intercultural learning.

While other scholars such as Dervin et al. (2020; see also East et al., 2022) have contended that reflection is an important component of intercultural learning, further scholarship has indicated that reflection alone does not offer sufficient contributions to guarantee the learning and transformation necessary for intercultural competence. The findings from Mascadri et al. (2017; see also Cloonan et al., 2017) in this review showed that self-reflection may reinforce existing biases. Thus, Mascadri et al. (2017) argue that, through reflection, teachers may develop greater self-awareness on intercultural learning, but this awareness may "not appear to influence... classroom practices" and, as such, may not play the expected transformative outcome (p. 231). This gap suggests that, for teachers, reflective activities can be more meaningful when they are well structured and complimented with actual practices in classroom contexts. It also indicates a need for scaffolding teacher learning and engagement.

Our cross-theme analysis showed that the pedagogical design of intercultural learning interventions mattered more than the intervention modes (e.g., digital, arts-based, international, experiential). For example, whether interventions took place through cultural simulations (see Padua & Smith, 2020), multimedia curricula (see Mercer, 2019), or virtual exchanges (see Carr, 2016), the outcomes were shaped by the extent to which teacher learning was scaffolded through structured tasks, guided inquiry, and instructor facilitation. This finding is in line with broader intercultural and global competence education and initiatives which suggest that instructional design features, including guided reflection, explicit intercultural frameworks, and facilitated dialogue, are stronger predictors of teacher learning outcomes when compared to the type of experience (Gunawardena et al., 2019; Lou & Bosley, 2023). From this perspective, cross-cultural experiences without critical pedagogy and appropriately facilitated learning can result in passive exposure.

The cross-theme analysis further suggested that scaffolding must be sustained, which indicates the need for continuous institutional and pedagogical support. Compared to isolated interventions, long-term practices such as mentorship opportunities, communities of practice, and structured ongoing professional development seemed to produce more meaningful outcomes. This finding aligns with Romijn et al.'s (2021; see also Deardorff et al., 2023) work showing that intercultural competence develops gradually through iterative cycles of experience, reflection, and application. Deardorff et al. (2023) also found that

experiential intercultural programs yield stronger outcomes when they incorporate structured reflection, mentorship, and guided interaction with host communities. These findings suggest that intercultural learning does not occur automatically through exposure to diverse settings; it emerges through thoughtful, mediated engagement. The findings offer insight into the importance of longitudinal engagement in teacher intercultural learning.

As indicated earlier in this article, short-term interventions such as short international trips (see Santoro, 2014) and one-semester multicultural courses (see Xu et al., 2016) did not significantly produce the desired intercultural developmental shifts. Unlike these short-term interventions, extended programs often led to increased cultural awareness and ethnorelative perspectives (McGregor et al., 2019; Moncloa et al., 2019). These findings align with longitudinal or developmental frameworks to intercultural competence (e.g., Hammer, 2012; King & Magolda 2005). Through their three-dimensional framework, King and Magolda (2005) explain that individuals advance through three stages (i.e., initial, intermediate, mature) as they develop intercultural competence.

This cross-theme synthesis showed that, to be effective, intercultural learning initiatives may need to integrate structured critical reflection and sustained and scaffolded engagement which, together, can better shed light on how intercultural learning is a process and must be structured and deliberate. Without these conditions (i.e., critical reflection and sustained and scaffolded engagement), or where these conditions are not robust, short-term interventions such as immersive simulations and unstructured study abroad programs may result in limited intercultural development. From this perspective, intercultural competence must also be assessed longitudinally to provide more nuanced understandings.

Conclusions

This systematic review synthesized twenty-three empirical studies published between 2013 and 2023 on the promotion and assessment of teacher intercultural competence across formal educational settings in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The review identified six thematic approaches: Pedagogical and instructional strategies, arts-based and reflective practices, study abroad and international experiences, immersion-based and experiential learning, technology-mediated intercultural learning, and structured professional development. Assessment practices across the corpus were sparse and inconsistent, with the IDI dominating among validated tools and many studies relying on self-report instruments or researcher-developed measures without systematic validation. Across all six themes, a consistent pattern emerged: The approach or modality of intercultural learning mattered less than the pedagogical conditions surrounding it. Structured reflection, mentorship, sustained engagement, and institutional support were the recurring conditions that differentiated substantive intercultural growth from surface-level cultural

awareness. Isolated, short-term, or unstructured interventions regardless of their format consistently produced limited or superficial outcomes.

These findings carry several significant implications for teacher education practice and institutional policy. First, intercultural learning must be treated as a longitudinal developmental process rather than an event. Single courses, standalone workshops, or one-off immersive experiences are insufficient to produce the orientation shifts that genuine intercultural competence requires. Teacher education programs should embed intercultural learning systematically across curricula, connecting coursework, field experience, and reflective practice in iterative cycles over time. Second, structured reflection is necessary but not sufficient on its own. Evidence from multiple themes shows that reflective activities, unless paired with critical pedagogical framing, external feedback, and opportunities for applied classroom practice, risk producing improved self-narration rather than genuine intercultural development. Teacher educators need to design reflection that pushes participants toward critical examination of power, identity, and pedagogical assumption. Third, mentorship and relational support are irreplaceable conditions for intercultural learning, particularly in study abroad and immersive contexts. Programs should build sustained mentorship into their design rather than treating it as an optional supplement. Fourth, assessment practices must become more rigorous, process-oriented, and multi-dimensional. The field's current over-reliance on self-report instruments and pre-post survey designs captures outcome snapshots but cannot illuminate how intercultural competence develops or is sustained over time. Multi-method approaches that integrate behavioral evidence, including classroom observation, performance-based tasks, and longitudinal tracking, are needed to build an evidence base capable of informing program improvement and policy investment.

Several directions for future research emerge directly from these gaps. Most urgently, the field needs longitudinal study designs that track intercultural development from pre-service preparation through in-service practice, capturing how competence evolves, stabilizes, or erodes across career stages. The disproportionate focus on pre-service teachers across this review—sixteen of twenty-three studies—leaves the intercultural development of practicing teachers substantially undertheorized. Future research should attend more systematically to how in-service teachers engage with and sustain intercultural learning amid the demands of real classroom environments, evolving student demographics, and shifting institutional contexts. Additionally, the geographical concentration of the existing literature in the United States and Australia, combined with the linguistic gatekeeping of an English-only inclusion criterion, means that intercultural learning traditions and practices from the Global South remain largely invisible in the field's evidence base. Inter-institutional international collaborations that center non-Western pedagogical traditions and multilingual research contexts would substantially enrich the field's theoretical and practical scope.

This review makes several contributions to the field of teacher intercultural learning. It provides the first systematic synthesis to simultaneously map the full range of approaches used to promote intercultural learning and the tools employed

to assess it across a decade of empirical literature in five English-speaking contexts. In doing so, it identifies not only what works, but the conditions under which it works. This is a distinction with direct relevance for teacher educators, program designers, and policymakers who must make decisions about curriculum, professional development investment, and evaluation frameworks. The review also surfaces two structural gaps that the field has not yet adequately addressed: The underdevelopment of in-service teacher intercultural learning research and the absence of rigorous, institutionally embedded assessment practices. This review, therefore, provides a grounded rationale for where resources, research attention, and policy effort are most needed to advance culturally responsive teacher education

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Appendix: A Summary Table of 23 Selected Studies

Selected studies	Settings	Participants	Key terms	Promotion	Assessment
1. Beutel & Tangen (2018)	Australia	PSTs	Intercultural competence/sensitivity	Prior intercultural experiences	Questionnaire
2. Carr (2016)	Australia	PSTs	Intercultural capability/Competence	eTutor online environment	
3. Casey (2016)	US	PSTs	Intercultural education	The author-created three-perspective format Her/Him, Them, and Me	
4. Catalano et al. (2021)	US	PSTs	Interculturality	The use of arts and community-based (ACB) approaches	
5. Cloonan et al. (2017)	Australia	ISTs	Intercultural learning/education	The use and the efficacy of using autobiographical narrative for teachers' intercultural learning	
6. Deaton & Goering (2020)	US	PSTs	Intercultural competence	A four-month teaching internship	
7. He et al. (2017)	US	ISTs	Intercultural competence	Short-term study abroad program:	
8. Lash et al. (2022)	US	PSTs	Intercultural competence/sensitivity	Intercultural teaching and learning and diverse US and international field experiences	The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer & Bennett, 2003)
9. Mascadri et al. (2017)	Australia	PSTs	Intercultural competence	The theoretical lens of self-authorship	
10. McGregor et al. 2019	UK	PSTs	Intercultural competence	Education abroad programs	The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer & Bennett, 2003)
11. McKinley et al. (2019)	UK	ISTs	Intercultural competence	The performance and negotiation of identities in the 'third space'	
12. Mercer (2019)	Canada	ISTs	Intercultural learning	An intercultural curriculum	
13. Moncloa et al. (2019)	US	ISTs	Intercultural competence	An intercultural competence professional development	Intercultural Development Inventory (pretest and posttest) and Kotter's eight-step organizational change process to institutionalize the initiative
14. Monroe & Ruan (2018)	US	PSTs	Intercultural sensitivity	the ABCs of Cultural Understanding (the ABCs), A—Autobiography of self, B—Biography of other,	

				and C's—Cross cultural analysis	
15. Nganga (2016)	US	PSTs	Intercultural competence	Instructional practices: the use of children's literature with a global focus, along with participating in on-going threaded discussions and reflections	
16. Padue & Smith (2020)	US	PSTs	Intercultural communicative competence	Cultural simulations	
17. Santoro (2014)	Australia	PSTs	Intercultural competence	International trips	
18. Szlachta & Champion (2020)	US	ISTs	Intercultural competence	Culturally responsive sexuality education	The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer & Bennett, 2003)
19. Cushner & Chang (2015)	US	PSTs	Intercultural competence	An overseas student teaching experience.	The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer & Bennett, 2003)
20. Tsuda et al. (2022)	US	ISTs & PSTs	Intercultural competence	An online international collaboration unit, called CULTURE (the Culture Unit of Learning to Understand, Respect, and Empathize)	
21. Varga-Dobai (2018)	US	PSTs	Intercultural awareness/Learning	An arts-based writing project, the Cultural Selfie	
22. Xu et al. (2016)	US	PSTs	Intercultural competence/sensitivity	The contents of a graduate-level multicultural perspectives course	The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer & Bennett, 2003)
23. Zhu et al. (2023)	US	PSTs	Intercultural competence	Examine how self-regulated learning (SRL) skills support students' ICC development	ICC was assessed using a standardized exam and an open-ended cultural dilemma

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this work, AI was used to improve language and readability with caution.

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