



Teacher's beliefs about student learning: A look at the role of culture on classroom practices

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Abstract

The role of teachers has evolved from a religious-based regimented job requiring no more than high school, GCE or qualifications to one that operates at the intersections of research, policy, and practice. Teaching is now understood as a social, ideological and political practice requiring knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and skills necessary to demonstrate global best practice. Using case study of selected school teachers in Cross River State Nigeria, this paper looks at the confluence of teacher beliefs as informed by culture and how these beliefs drive classroom practices. A combination of observation and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data which was phenomenologically analyzed.

Keywords: teacher beliefs, student learning, role of culture, classroom practices

Introduction

This study explores the correlation between teachers' culture and their classroom practices in elementary classrooms. While the concept of beliefs and culture are not new in the context of teaching and learning, there continues to be need to investigate their combined impact on classroom practices. The last two decades have seen notable works on impact of teacher beliefs about racial, ethnic and linguistic differences; as well as cultural attitudes on student learning (Case and Hemmings, 2005; Cochran-Smith 2000; Good and Brophy 2003; Raths and McAninch 2003; Banks and Banks 2004 and Brown 2004) [4, 5, 9, 24, 3]. There seem to be a consensus among these scholars that not only are these issues present and often problematic, but they influence teacher behavior, classroom practices and consequently, students' academic performance.

Keeping in mind that different disciplines present literature on beliefs from interdisciplinary perspectives, this paper focuses on the relationship between possible influences of unique cultural practices on teacher classroom practices. Specific attention is paid to specific actions by teachers which are directed and embedded in the teaching and learning processes. The expected outcome of this study is to highlight Teacher classroom practices based on teacher cultural beliefs. The study also explores the potential consequences of these practices on student academic performance (Self-image).

The main focus of this paper is an analysis of what the authors observed and documented with respect to teacher beliefs and their corresponding classroom practices during their twelve-week student teaching field experience. The study looks at student teachers' observed classroom practices as reported by university field supervisors and as explained by the student teachers themselves during the lead author's four-year tenure as Coordinator of the Teaching Practice (TP) Programme of a forty-thousand student federal university in South-South geopolitical region in Nigeria. While her job jurisdiction covered the entire state where the university is located (Referred to as Home State) as well as four (4) neighboring

states, this paper concerns itself mainly with teachers practicing in one of the three education zones of the home state.

In order to explore and understand the relationship (if any), the interconnectedness and influence of these variables (beliefs, culture & classroom practices) on one another, it is necessary to learn from in-service teachers themselves. In searching for empirical data on studies specifically on the influence of culture on teacher beliefs leading to classroom practices, it became evident that this area of research has not been critically explored thus far. There are, however, scholars (Pajares, 1992) [19] who have found that teachers' personal histories and lived experiences guide their beliefs and these beliefs inform their multicultural classroom practices. Other studies reported similar findings. Gudydunst & Kim (2003) also found that beliefs, attitudes and socially constructed stereotypes influence not only teacher communication with students from other cultural background, perceptions also influence teacher classroom practices. Though the studies highlighted here have made meaningful contribution to the field, they do not address specifically, the impact of cultural beliefs on teacher classroom practices in the African context.

Research Questions

This work was guided by the following research questions:

1. Are teacher classroom practices influenced by their beliefs?
2. Are these beliefs based on teachers' cultural backgrounds?

Rational/purpose for the study

At a time when 21st century labour markets demand technological skills, global orientation and worldview, it is imperative to heed Gay's (2004) [8] warning that the challenge of preparing teachers to effectively serve today's diverse and multicultural societies demands teacher education that focuses on reflective practices that address the cultural, linguistic, racial and ethnic differences that may exist between classroom

teachers and their prospective students. In this manner, teacher education can truly act as a catalyst for change.

The primary purpose of this paper is to look at the confluence of how teacher culture, personal beliefs intersect with classroom practices.

Methods

This study uses phenomenological analysis, an approach grounded in psychological qualitative research with uniquely ideographic emphasis. This emphasis fosters depth and insight into individual participants' contexts, personal experiences within the said context and meaning-making of given phenomenon. Phenomenology has its theoretical roots in works of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

From curricular, teaching and learning standpoint, it is only logical that the theoretical conceptual framework of this study be informed by Lincoln's (1992) ^[14] assertion that phenomenology is anchored on two premises: one, that knowledge is a human construction and two, that social life is an enacted, meaning-embedded experience, inseparable from human beliefs and values. This work captures the major principles and assumptions embedded in phenomenology which hold that; working phenomenologically is rigorous, it requires a profound sense of what is competent and practical in educational conduct (Pinar, Renolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995) ^[23]. The open-ended nature of this study lends itself to a phenomenological approach which "tries to ward off any tendency toward constructing predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts" (Cerbone 2006, p. 29) that govern research studies. Consequent, it is the most suited for this study whose focus is the relationship between culture and beliefs and their influence on human daily existence including professional practices such as teachers' classroom practices. Being cognizant of some existing socio-cultural constructs that this study might be up against, the researchers proceed based on Ritchie and Wilson's (2000) ^[25] reaction to those constructs when they noted that:

... The normative force of educational discourses in the classrooms ... [such as] curriculum guides, administrative dictates, experienced teachers' advice and attitudes, and even their students behaviors shouted or whispered powerful values (P. 54).

These scholars add that these constructs often undermined any sense of authority, professional knowledge of content discipline and even knowledge the teachers had previously developed in the course of their teacher preparation training. Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) authenticate this notion when they argue that thousands of hours those teachers spend as students from primary through tertiary education including teacher training shape their beliefs. The influence of culture on these beliefs is the focus of this paper.

Participants

Participants for this study comprise of selected in-service teachers in the southern education zone in Cross River State, Nigeria. Purposive homogeneous sampling was used to identify teachers who have taught for five-to-twenty years.

The unit of analysis of the study is individual teachers. It is important to note that while these teachers come to this study with unique backgrounds such as training, teaching experiences, values and beliefs, they are bonded by the common culture of the study area. This commonality among them as participants in this study extends to their profession as trained teachers who are teaching in schools within a particular region of Cross River State, Nigeria.

Data Sources (Instrumentation)

A combination of observation and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The open-ended nature of phenomenology allows for natural, free-flowing communication and exchange of information needed for the semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the face-to-face interaction during the researchers' classroom visits enable observation and additional data collection. Using data from more than one mode facilitates triangulation and adds validity to the study.

Procedure

This study adhered to the basic qualitative research procedure of starting with the purpose and rationale for the study, followed by the context, and overarching as well as specific research questions. In consonance with Peshkin's (1993) ^[21] assertion that data description, interpretation, verification and evaluation are not discrete entities, but that phenomenological approach was used to define, describe and interpret participants' classroom practices (Feldman, 2000) ^[7]. It is believed that the analytical processes will lead to identification of themes. Attention was also paid for any new emerging and shared perspectives (if any) among participants with regards to the question:

1. Are teacher classroom practices influenced by their beliefs?
2. Are these beliefs based on teachers' cultural backgrounds?

Beliefs Defined

Given the multi/Interdisciplinary nature of the concept of beliefs, it is important to note that beliefs are dynamic and complex. A few multidisciplinary definitions will help direct this study. In addition to personal definitions of belief, there are institutionally established and accepted notions of beliefs. For instance, psychologists define it as psychological state in which individuals hold a proposition or premise to be true (Schwitzgebel, 2012) ^[27]. Philosophers on the other hand, define it from an abstract viewpoint as the interaction between the believer and the object of belief (Goldman, 1967) ^[10]. This study borrows from the field of communication which views belief as:

The mental acceptance of propositions, statements or facts, as true on the ground of apparent authority, which does not have to be based on actual fact and are formed and internalized in different ways. Each person's beliefs are unique, and base on culture, ethnicity, backgrounds, experiences and needs (Gudykunst & Kim 1997, P. 127)

The dynamism of the notion of beliefs is further complicated

by individual grip of the concept. Nespor's (1987) ^[16] position that beliefs are deeply personal, stable and rooted in vivid memories of past experiences and everyday application of those beliefs. Nespor (1987) ^[16] adds that beliefs lie beyond the individual's control or knowledge and are usually unaffected by persuasion. Recognizing the complex psychological roots of beliefs, Thompson (1992) ^[29] describes them as a system of quasi-logical structures subdivided into primary and derivative beliefs. However, this study leans more on the Abelson's (1979) ^[1] summary of the characteristics of teachers' beliefs below:

1. Beliefs rely more on affective and evaluative components than knowledge systems. In effect, teachers' values and feelings often affect what and how they teach even when they conflict with their knowledge.
2. Beliefs that derive from existential presumptions or personal truths are generally unaffected by persuasion and are perceived by the teacher as being beyond his/her control or influence. These types of beliefs include a teacher's beliefs about students' innate abilities or characteristics.
3. Alternatively is also a feature of beliefs. In this situation teachers may establish an alternative instructional format of which they have no direct experience but which they unilaterally decide might be ideal. Nespor (1987) ^[16] says in this case, teachers' beliefs "serve as a means of defining goals and tasks" (p.310)
4. Belief systems are composed mainly of episodically stored material which is derived from personal experience and they become lenses through which they continue to comprehend subsequent events in their lives.

Culture Defined

Culture is a term that people use quite often to refer to anything and everything that exists in a place or organization ranging from ways of thinking, behaving, or working celebration to fine arts, dance, ways of being, beliefs, behavior and customs depending on the discipline. For instance, anthropologists, sociologists, multiculturalists and psychologists all have slightly different emphasis in their use of the term. The term is also defined from the perspective of a particular society, group, place, or time. For instance, it is defined from abstract to the symbolic markers used by ethnic groups to distinguish themselves visibly from each other such as body modification, clothing or jewelry and from other groups.

It is therefore safe to say culture is the complex whole of a society since there is no consensus among scholars regarding its definition. However, a popular and widely used definition is one espoused by a British anthropologist Tylor (2007) ^[31] who states "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (P. 125). His definition includes everything that gives a society its identity. It is informative to note that regardless of which definition one chooses to apply, it should consider the following five basic characteristics. These characteristics are that:

- Culture is learned
- Culture is shared

- Culture is symbolic
- Culture is integrated
- Culture is dynamic

Culture is learned from families, peers, institutions, communities and media unconsciously. The process of learning culture is known as enculturation.

Culture is shared with other members of one's group and or subgroup which enables them to act in socially appropriate and acceptable ways as well as predict the way others will act. However, this does not mean that culture is homogenous (the same).

Culture is generally symbolic and representative of values and beliefs of a group or subgroups which sometimes vary cross-culturally and are arbitrary. These symbolisms only have meaning when a cultural group agrees on their meaning and use. For example, language, medium of exchange, dress code and art are all symbols with language as the most important symbolic component of a culture.

Culture is integrated because its various parts are interconnected. All aspects of a culture are related to one another and to truly understand a culture, one must learn about all of its parts, not only a few. This is known as holism.

Dynamism of culture derives from its ability to interact, grow and change. One important aspect of most cultures is that it is dynamic and not static. It is constantly changing. Many individuals refuse to change with the culture and hold onto their childhood upbringing values. Such people are referred to as traditionalist. There are others who either try to manipulate the cultural change or out-rightly reject some aspects of culture for whatever reason; they are often classified as progressives. However, it is ultimately the social matrix of one's environment that forms values, beliefs, character, behaviors and daily practices including teacher classroom practices of a people. This is facilitated by intercultural contacts which lead to exchange of ideas and symbols. All cultures change in response to changing times and ways of living. And because cultures are integrated, a change in one component in the system is likely to result in some kind of adjustment in the entire system.

The diversity of cultural practices and adaptations to the problems of human existence often lead some to question which practices are the best, especially between western and non-western cultures. Ethnocentrism is when one views their own culture as the best and only proper way to behave and adapt. Since most humans believe their culture is the best and only way to live, it is fair to expect small amounts of ethnocentrism everywhere in the world. These small doses help to create a sense of cultural pride and to build strong, cohesive groups. Conversely, high amounts of ethnocentrism in combination with an unwillingness to be tolerant can be destructive. Some believe that ethnocentrism is at the heart of colonization, ethnic cleansing and genocide around the world.

This may explain why cultural anthropologists have advocated cultural relativism. This principle holds that all cultures must be understood in terms of their own values and beliefs, not by the standards of another. Under this principle, no culture is better than any other and cultures can only be judged on whether they are serving the needs of their own people.

Intersection of Beliefs and Culture

Scholars (Phillips 1997; Muller 2016) ^[22] who argue that culture influence personal beliefs and identity is based on the premise that culture gives groups and sub groups of people the label to claim identity and belonging. This same line of argument holds that because humans are social animals, culture is the glue that holds their groups and subgroups together. Adding to this trend of thought is the belief that identity is the product of culture because value systems; everything that people hold as right and wrong are a result of the culture(s) in which one was brought up. For example, while the western culture is particular about external displays of distance between people in social spaces, such as how close I stand or sit next to you, the African culture places great emphasis on seniority in a group. The oldest person in a group automatically assumes leadership role and expects immeasurable respect from members of that group (Phillips, 2017) ^[22]

Consequently, it is reasonable to argue that if culture is the shared values, beliefs and norms of a specific group of people, it has the potential to influence the manner in which people learn, live and behave. There is consensus that among many theorists that culture is an important shaper of people's personality because it is both the product as well as the necessary condition of communal existence (Müller 2016). Additionally, based on Tylor (2007) ^[31] argument that the symbolisms of culture only have meaning when a cultural group or subgroup agrees on their meaning and use; these meanings can form basis for the establishment of belief systems.

No one has made a better argument on the connectivity of culture and beliefs than the Jewish Hungarian neurochemist, Knoll (1976) ^[12] who states:

The social environment includes many factors that impinge on development, from bonding and competitive stress to the social facilitation of learning. These can affect brain functioning in many ways, but usually they have no direct influence on functional brain architecture. However, symbolizing cultures own a direct path into our brains and affect the way major parts of the executive brain become wired up during development. This is the key idea behind the notion of deep enculturation.... This process entails setting up the very complex hierarchies of cognitive demons (automatic programs) that ultimately establish the possibility of new forms of thought. Culture effectively wires up functional subsystems in the brain that would not otherwise exist (P.62)

It is safe to note that evidence abound to support the relationship between culture and beliefs systems. Influential psychologist and neuroscientist Donald (1991) ^[6] writing on culture's influence on human brain functioning and structure holds that culture influences brain functioning to a great extent. Adding to this line of thought, Sincero (2012) ^[28] adds there are strong assumptions asserting that people who are born and bred in the same culture share common personality traits, social practices that are all based on their established beliefs. These assumptions are reinforced by many scholars

(Muller 2016 & Nesper 1987) ^[16] who associate birth place, group affiliations, and cultural practices to human behavior and thought processes, which in turn feed into beliefs. Nesper (1987) ^[16] adds that beliefs are beyond the individual's control or knowledge; allowing the individual to be subconsciously controlled by those beliefs.

Yet existing literature cautions against pitting cultures against each other. In his Lyrical and Critical Essays, Camus (1968) ^[2] writes,

Men express themselves in harmony with their land. And superiority, as far as culture is concerned, lies in this harmony and nothing else. There are no higher or lower cultures. There are cultures that are more or less true.

It can therefore be argued that all groups and subgroups should learn, understand and emulate the noblest aspects of every culture. Camus (1968) ^[2] adds that the benefits exploring other people's ways of life is of great benefits to brain development.

Discussion and Analysis

Using culture as the lens to understand classroom practices may obscure more widespread (and harder to control) socioeconomic and biological factors that influence daily life. To truly understand culture's role in shaping the way humans live and function in social and business spaces, it must be understood that culture is not just the inert repository of ideas and customs that guide the way people live, but that culture itself is shaped by various factors as stated by President Obama in his autobiography: *The Audacity of Hope*. He disputed the erroneous claims by other non-African peoples that *black culture* is to blame for African Americans' plight in the United States, stating:

In other words, African Americans understand that culture matters but that culture is shaped by circumstance. We [Americans] know that many in the inner city [Where most Black African Americans live] are trapped by their own self-destructive behavior but that those behavior are not innate.

Obama is making the point that people (Groups and subgroups) practice behaviors that ultimately become associated with that group and eventually described as the culture of that group. So, it is naive to believe, as the now discredited *New Yorker* writer Lehrer (2012) ^[13] did, that culture creates a person. Culture shapes people, but many events mold culture and people shape these events just as much. Therefore, to blame culture for inhumane (School Shootings in the US) and sometimes barbaric killings (Northeast Nigeria) going on around the world would be wrongheaded.

The analysis of the data collected in our study revealed that people's cultural matrix initially provide them with a world view, value system, and a way of interacting with people of their own culture. These include factors like set of protocols when dealing with elders, gender roles in family and communities as well as communal living. For example, our participants' classroom practices were categorized in the

following three areas: teacher-student activities in lesson plans, classroom sitting arrangement, and student-teacher communication of ease of reporting.

Teacher-student activities in lesson plans

In addition to classroom management, teacher training and instructional materials, lesson planning also known as instructional design underscores effective teaching and learning. Of the 293 in-service teacher lesson plans reviewed, one hundred percent of them followed the formulaic template used by the school systems. Below is a sample representative of approved lesson plan format.

Sample Lesson Plan Template

Ages 3-5 year-olds

Overall Goals – To

1. Help student explore many different types of transportation
2. Help students learn about all the different jobs that are available in transportation and the duties of each one
3. Add to and stimulate students' language
4. Allow student to express their feelings through music
5. Encourage creativity
6. Help students learn to identify types of transportation through different activities
7. Experience many different types of transportation through different activities
8. Provide a fun, enjoyable learning experience

Boat

Goals

1. To learn about many different types of boats
2. To learn about the purpose of buoys
3. To learn about the crew of a boat
4. To experience the use of earphones
5. To provide students with the opportunity to make a boat of their own

Schedule of Activities (40 Minutes)

Students are welcome to class, greeted and then divided into two groups. One group will paint suitcases, the other will make banana boats.

Rotating Small Groups

Group 1: SUITCASES: These suitcases will be used for tomorrow's activities. Teachers should write students' names inside the shoe box. The suitcases should be placed on top of the lockers to dry after they are painted. Each student should wear an apron while painting. After painting the suitcases, you could sing "Row, Row, Row your boat" or "Over the Deep Blue Sea."

Group 2: BANANA BOATS: Each student will be given half a banana. They will peel the banana and cut it in half length-wise. They will place their split banana on tinfoil. They will then put marshmallows and chocolate chips down the center of the banana. Talk to students about boat they are making. They should then wrap their banana boat in the foil.

(Transportation: Captain Hook will blow a whistle when it is time to rotate groups.)

(http://www.uen.org/cte/family/early_childhood/downloads/curriculum/transportation-lesson.pdf)

While the teacher activity column had slight variation in what the teacher would be doing during the lesson delivery, based on instructional content, 92% of the activity in the student activity column simply has students "listening to the teacher." The other 8% was not much different as it had students "paying attention to the teacher." In following up with the semi-structured interviews, participants noted that the teacher is the *authority* and should be *the only one talking while students listen and learn*. One participant said "Students are expected to sit quietly and listen to the teacher and answer questions when asked." (Participant 211)

Classroom sitting arrangement

During our classroom visits, we observed that 88% of the sitting arrangement were the *traditional single rows* with students staring at the back of the head of the student in front of them. The remaining 12% percent attempted *pair-pod sitting*.



Fig 1: Traditional Sitting

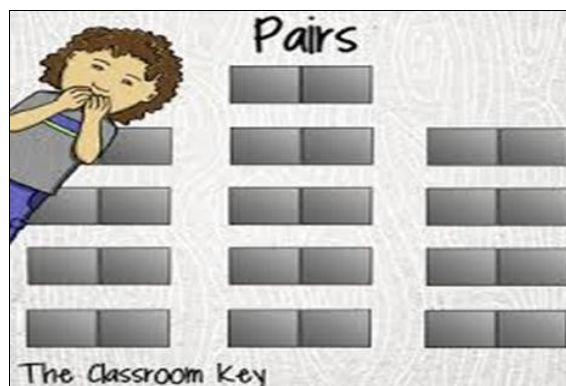


Fig 2: Pair-Pod Sitting

We found these sitting arrangements which had the teacher as the focus in the classroom to be in consonance with cultural beliefs of the region under study. In the South-South region of Nigeria, power is in the hands of the elders (in rural village areas) or in the hands of politicians or the rich. In the classrooms, the teachers were the ones with knowledge, authority and power. When we entered any classroom, students robotically sit up straight, are led by one of their own in a chorus greeting of the guest(s) and sit back down very quietly. It was obvious that this practice had been ingrained in

the students from very early age. In the eyes of our participants, this was a mark of good classroom management on their part.

Next to lesson planning and instructional delivery, we found that sitting arrangement was a major factor in the way teachers interacted and communicated with students.

Student-Teacher Communication

In the traditional sitting, students could and were not allowed to communicate with each other. In most cases, the teacher did not leave the front of the classroom from where he/she delivered the lesson and students sat in their seats stoically copying notes written on the board by the teacher. In 35-minute lessons, teachers' voices were heard an average of 89% of the time with students only answering questions asked by the teacher. These questions were generally requiring students to repeat what the teacher said or wrote on the board.

We found these classroom practices to align with a Huffington Post Blogger Lynch's (2011) ^[15] position that a person's culture and upbringing has a profound effect on how they see the world and how they process information. This is reiterated by Nisbett (2003) ^[17] in "The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently" which showed how the Asian holistic view of the world differed from their American counterparts. American tends to view the world in parts or distinct classes of objects defined by a set of rules. It was extremely see students' world aside from the singular perspective instilled by the teacher. Students very rarely asked questions during instructional delivery for fear of being shouted down by the teacher for not paying attention or being outright dumb. Content presented was simply repeated over and over again to facilitate rote memorization. Attempts at getting students to articulate content learned in their own words yielded very little success as they seemed to be shy, timid and unable.

Rosenberg, Westling and McLeskey (2011) ^[26] in "Special Education for Today's Teachers: An Introduction," say that the influence of culture on the importance of education and participation styles cannot be overestimated. Many Asian students, for example, tend to be quiet in class, and making eye contact with teachers is considered inappropriate. In contrast, most European American children are taught to value active classroom discussion and to look teachers directly in the eye to show respect, while their teachers view students' participation as a sign of active engagement in the learning process and demonstration of competence.

The Nigerian students' school practices seem to mimic the Asian students' school behavior noted above. It also reinforces Camus (1968) ^[2] advice that groups should learn about one another due to its great benefits to brain development. Parents from some Hispanic cultures tend to regard teachers as experts and will often defer educational decision making to them, whereas European American parents are often more actively involved in their children's classrooms, are visible in the classrooms, or volunteer and assist teachers. These cultural differences in value and belief may cause educators to make inaccurate judgments regarding the value that non-European American families place on education. This information is helpful when we consider how cultural background might influence approach to learning and school performance.

Conclusion

The definition of normal school behavior can be based upon individualist and collectivist cultures. Teachers who lack knowledge about a culture might misinterpret the behavior of a child and inaccurately judge students as poorly behaved or disrespectful. Culture has iterative life cycle. In many societies, cultures change. Some aspects of daily practices are rejected and abandoned for newer more functional ways of living. Cultural tendencies impact the way children participate in education. To engage students effectively in the learning process, teachers must know their students and their academic abilities individually, rather than relying on group stereotypes or prior experience with other students of similar backgrounds. Even more importantly, people's (Including teachers) aspirations and whole live scan be completely dominated by culturally inspired practices if they are not purposeful in daily existence. This was especially prominent in this study. Obedience, submissiveness and unquestioned compliance were hallmarks in more than 92% of the classrooms observed.

Consequently, it becomes necessary for humans, especially professionals (teachers) to modify behavior, professional practices and ways of being to suit context (Teaching and learning) which may go contrary to their personal cultural programming. Starting with the family, then peer groups, and neighbors, schools, and the arts people grow up with cultural values much like a computer program. The majority never question their programming and take it as natural, the norm, the only way. Others rise above their programming and are able to step outside and look at their culture objectively; how it drives their daily lives and actively rebel against parts that they consider no longer relevant. The findings from this study reiterates what Mora-Bourgeois (2015) position in her article "Reflections on the Impact of Culture in the Classroom." She noted that culture includes people's daily activities, what they do and what they believe, adding that it also influences the lens through which people see, interpret and understand the world. Culture also dictates the way people interact and communicate with each other. Culture therefore, determines, to a great extent, learning and teaching styles, and by extension, culture significantly influence and drive teachers' classroom practices.

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