

## Review Article

# INVESTIGATING STAFF AWARENESS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN VIENTIANE

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### ABSTRACT

As globalization continues to shape educational environments, fostering cultural diversity is essential for creating inclusive, dynamic, and effective workplaces. This study explores staff awareness of cultural diversity at an international school in Vientiane, Laos. This study aims to (1) investigate the staff awareness of cultural diversity, and (2) to compare the significant difference between gender, age, work experience, and educational qualifications on cultural diversity awareness. The study employed a quantitative approach, beginning with a pilot survey. The results revealed generally high levels of awareness among staff members. However, communication and conflict resolution emerged as the weakest areas. While gender and age did not show significant effects, work experience and educational qualifications had a partial influence on awareness. These results suggest the importance of enhancing staff competencies in communication and conflict management within multicultural environments. Given the growing diversity in schools, addressing these areas could improve interpersonal interactions and foster a more inclusive atmosphere for both staff and students. While the study provides valuable insights, there are limitations, including the relatively small sample size. Future research should expand the sample size, incorporate a more diverse range of participants, and use longitudinal designs to track changes over time. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on workplace diversity, emphasizing the critical role of cultural awareness in fostering inclusive and effective environments within globally interconnected schools.

**Keywords:** cultural diversity, staff awareness, international schools, cross-cultural communication, multicultural team dynamics.

### INTRODUCTION

The global education landscape has increasingly prioritized cultural diversity, particularly within international schools. These schools, which serve a mix of expatriates, diplomats, and local populations, have become microcosms of global diversity. As a result, the importance of staff awareness of cultural diversity has shifted from being a secondary consideration to a fundamental necessity for effective teaching and learning. In international schools, where multiculturalism is intrinsic to the environment, educators must possess a deep understanding of various cultures to foster an inclusive and equitable learning atmosphere (UNESCO, 2021).

This trend is particularly evident in international schools in Vientiane, Laos, where the growing number of multinational families relocating to the city has transformed these institutions into vibrant centers of cultural exchange. According to UNESCO's 2021 report, around 45% of international schools worldwide now prioritize cultural competence in their professional development programs, underscoring the increasing recognition of cultural awareness in education (UNESCO, 2021). However, despite the global momentum, research on the level of cultural awareness among staff in Vientiane's international schools remains scarce.

The International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) has reported that schools with higher levels of cultural awareness tend to have more satisfied students, fewer behavioral issues, and improved academic outcomes (IBO, 2020). A 2020 study conducted across several international schools found that students felt more supported and engaged when teachers demonstrated cultural sensitivity (IBO, 2020). However, the level of cultural awareness among staff varies across schools. While some institutions invest heavily in cultural competency

training, others may not offer formal programs or resources. A survey by the Council of International Schools (CIS) revealed that only 30% of schools in Southeast Asia provide comprehensive cultural diversity training, highlighting the need for more research into how educators in the region are prepared to address the challenges of cultural diversity (CIS, 2022).

The socio-cultural context of Vientiane adds another layer of complexity. The city's blend of traditional Lao culture with influences from neighboring countries such as Thailand, China, and Vietnam creates a dynamic cultural environment. International schools in Vientiane must balance respect for local traditions with the diverse global perspectives of their students and staff. This is especially important in the context of holidays and festivals, which reflect a mix of Buddhist traditions and contemporary global observances. Educators must integrate these cultural elements into the curriculum and extracurricular activities to ensure that all students feel acknowledged and valued (CIS, 2022).

In conclusion, the awareness and understanding of cultural diversity among staff members in international schools directly impacts the quality of education. Culturally competent educators create environments where students from diverse backgrounds can succeed academically and socially. By prioritizing cultural diversity, international schools in Vientiane can serve as models of inclusive education, preparing students for success in an interconnected global society (UNESCO, 2021).

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural diversity is becoming increasingly significant in educational settings globally, especially with the expansion of international schools (Smith, 2020). In Vientiane, the capital of Laos, these schools play a crucial role in shaping education, offering a platform where

students from diverse cultural backgrounds converge (Jones & Lee, 2019). This literature review explores existing research on staff awareness of cultural diversity in international schools, highlighting the importance and current state of this field (Williams *et al.*, 2018). Understanding cultural diversity in educational institutions is essential as schools reflect society and are places where students can learn about different cultures and develop social skills. According to Banks (2010), culturally responsive teaching can enhance academic achievement and promote social cohesion among students. In Vientiane's international schools, where students come from varied ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, it is crucial for staff to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to handle such a diverse environment. A lack of cultural awareness could lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, or dropouts, undermining the school's goal of providing quality education for all.

This research is significant as it has the potential to influence policies and practices. International schools in Vientiane face unique challenges and opportunities due to the city's geographic and demographic context. Research into staff awareness of cultural diversity can identify gaps in training programs and areas that require additional support. UNESCO (2016) emphasizes the importance of continuous professional development to keep educators abreast of best practices in multicultural education. Addressing these gaps can help school leaders design interventions that better prepare teachers and administrators for the complexities of a diverse student body.

While there is extensive research on staff awareness of cultural diversity in international schools, much of it is fragmented and focused on Western contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how these principles apply in non-Western settings like Vientiane. Garcia and Guerra (2004) call for more research in regions outside Europe and North America, particularly in Southeast Asia. Although theoretical frameworks for cultural competence are well established, there is limited empirical data on their practical applications in schools such as those in Vientiane.

Research from other Asian contexts provides some insights. For example, Kim (2013) studied international school staff in Seoul, South Korea, and identified challenges faced by educators in diverse environments. However, the applicability of this research to Vientiane may be limited due to differences in cultural norms and institutional structures. Tung (2014) found that cultural sensitivity training positively affected teacher effectiveness in Hong Kong, resulting in better classroom management and increased student engagement. Nevertheless, the transferability of these findings to Vientiane remains uncertain due to differing socio-political and cultural dynamics.

Recent studies have begun to address these gaps. Pham (2019) conducted qualitative research on international school staff in Bangkok, highlighting challenges and opportunities in multicultural settings. Nguyen (2020) examined multicultural education policies in Vietnamese schools, providing insights into Southeast Asia's broader educational landscape. These studies emphasize the need to align international school practices with national educational objectives and community values.

Emerging research also explores the intersection of cultural diversity and technology in education. Digital tools and platforms offer new ways to enhance staff awareness and facilitate cross-cultural communication in international schools. Lee (2017) showed that virtual reality simulations could create immersive learning experiences that help educators understand different cultures. Zhang (2018) explored how online collaboration tools can foster intercultural

dialogue among teachers and students. These technological advancements present innovative solutions to the challenges of cultural diversity in international schools.

The research highlights the growing importance of cultural diversity in educational settings, particularly in international schools, where students from various cultural backgrounds come together. In Vientiane, Laos, international schools play a pivotal role in shaping education, offering unique opportunities for students to engage with different cultures and develop vital social skills (Smith, 2020; Jones & Lee, 2018). A key aspect of managing this cultural diversity is ensuring that school staff are aware of and prepared to address the challenges that come with it. According to Banks (2010), culturally responsive teaching can foster academic success and promote social cohesion, making it essential for educators in international schools to be well-equipped with the knowledge and skills to navigate such diverse environments. Without this awareness, misunderstandings and conflicts may arise, potentially hindering the educational experience for students from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study adopted a quantitative approach (Creswell, 2014) to explore staff awareness of cultural diversity in an international school in Vientiane, Laos. Quantitative data gathered through surveys distributed to staff members. The survey included a scale of questions designed to assess staff awareness of cultural diversity (Creswell, 2014). Demographic data, such as age, gender, nationality, and years of experience in international education, will be collected to explore potential correlations between these variables and staff awareness levels (Fink, 2017).

The data was analyzed using SPSS software, employing descriptive statistics and correlation analyses (Field, 2013). These techniques were used to identify patterns and relationships within the data, such as the influence of demographic factors on cultural diversity awareness. This quantitative approach aimed to provide measurable and statistical insights into staff attitudes and beliefs, offering a clear understanding of the impact of cultural diversity awareness in the international school setting in Vientiane, Laos. The focus on statistical analysis ensures that the findings are reliable and quantifiable, contributing to a deeper understanding of cultural diversity within the school context (Creswell, 2014).

The research site for this study is an International School in Laos. Over the past decade, Vientiane has grown into a hub for international business, diplomacy, and education. International schools serve a diverse student body, including Laotian nationals, expatriates, and students from neighboring countries like Thailand, Vietnam, China, Korea, and Japan. This diversity extends to the staff, who come from various cultural backgrounds and bring a wide range of educational experiences.

Given the school's diverse demographic, the strategy aimed to capture a broad range of perspectives across different staff categories, including teachers, teacher assistants, administrators, and support staff. This approach was critical for gaining a holistic understanding of cultural awareness within the school community.

Purposive sampling was used within each stratum to ensure that participants were selected with intention, based on their specific relevance to the study's objectives (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). While the selection process aimed to minimize bias, it was crucial that each group was represented accurately.

A pilot test was conducted with a small group of 10 staff members from the chosen school, the survey was sent out to teachers, administrative, and the management team, 8 responses were received in three days (5 female and 3 male). The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 64 and above, with educational backgrounds including undergraduate degrees (e.g., BA or BSc) and master's degrees (e.g., MA or MSc) or their equivalents.

Feedback from the pilot test is used for improvement, leading to revisions that enhanced the clarity and precision of the questionnaire. These refinements ultimately resulted in a more reliable final version of the instrument. Originally consisting of 67 questions, the questionnaire was revised to 57 after a thorough review of pilot feedback.

### Participants' Age

The majority of participants are in the 45-54 age range, making up 35% (21 participants). The second-largest group is the 35-44 age range, accounting for 33% (20 participants). The third group, aged 25-34, represents 15% (9 participants). The 55-64 age group comprises 13% (8 participants), followed by those aged 64 and above, which makes up 2% (1 participants). Finally, the smallest group is the 18-24 age range, with just 1.6% (1 participant).

### Participants' Gender

There is a significant difference between the number of female and male participants. A total of 40 females (67%) and 20 males (33%) took part.

### Participants' Nationality

There are participants from 11 different nationalities: Lao (25=45%), American (15=25%), French (3=5%), Korean (3=5%), Canadian (2=3%), Australian (1=2%), Caucasian (1=2%), British (1=2%), New Zealander (1=2%), Myanma (1=2%), Scottish (1=2%), and no response (6=10%).

### Participants' Education Qualification

The greatest number of participants are Undergraduate degree or equivalent e.g BA or BSC, consisted of 34 participants and covered (57%). The Master's Degree or equivalent e.g. MA or MSC comprised 25 participants (42%). Then the lower one Doctorate or Research Degree e.g. PHD covers 1 participant (2%).

### Participants' Role

Among the participants in the sample international school, 23 were teachers (including English as 2 Additional Language-EAL teachers and another 2 Individual Learning Support - ILS teachers), making up 38% of the total. Additionally, 17 participants were administrative staff, representing 28%, and 7 instructional assistants (IAs) accounted for 12%. The leadership team included 3 participants (5%), and 10 participants (17%) did not respond.

### Participants' Working Experience

The majority of participants (33%) have 2-5 years of experience at the sample school, totaling 20 individuals. The second-largest groups, each comprising 14 participants (23%), have either 0-2 years or 5-10 years of experience. Additionally, 11 participants (18%) have 5-10 years of experience, and one participant (2%) did not respond.

## DISCUSSION

The results from the questionnaire reveal that staff members generally perceive cultural diversity positively, although there are areas of variation that highlight room for improvement in terms of Communication and Conflict Resolution, the result suggests that there are specific challenges regarding cultural diversity that require attention, points to differing experiences, suggesting that while some staff members feel included, others face barriers.

Regarding demographic factors, gender had no significant impact on awareness of cultural diversity, with only minor variations across sections. This indicates that diversity awareness initiatives can focus on the broader staff group rather than gender-specific approaches.

Age and work experience had limited impact on perceptions, though age showed a significant difference. Staff from different age groups perceived creativity differently, suggesting that age-specific strategies may be necessary for fostering inclusivity in creative processes. Work experience had little effect, while more experienced staff had different views on diversity management, indicating that experience may influence perceptions in specific contexts (Dillman *et al.*, 2014).

Educational qualifications generally did not significantly affect staff awareness of cultural diversity, indicating that other factors, such as experience or organizational culture, may play a larger role in shaping awareness (Fowler, 2014).

In conclusion, while the general awareness of cultural diversity is positive, significant variability in staff experiences suggests that targeted efforts are needed to address areas like inclusion, communication, and creative processes. Understanding the demographic factors that influence perceptions will help tailor diversity initiatives to ensure they are effective and inclusive for all staff (APA, 2017; Creswell, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

The results from 60 participants at an international school in Vientiane show that staff members generally perceive cultural awareness positively. indicating a strong overall awareness of cultural diversity within the organization.

The study offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of fostering a culturally diverse educational environment. While staff recognize the importance of cultural diversity in enriching the learning experience, a gap exists between this recognition and the implementation of strategies to promote a truly inclusive environment.

To create a more inclusive learning environment, it is essential for staff to be equipped with cultural competencies. Schools should consider implementing training programs that enhance cultural awareness and equip staff with strategies for effective communication and collaboration (Gay, 2010). Additionally, policies addressing cultural diversity can provide a structured framework, ensuring consistency and effectiveness in promoting inclusivity throughout the organization. Embracing diversity and integrating it into the school culture leads to a more supportive learning environment for both staff and students (Freire, 1970).

A diverse staff brings a wealth of perspectives, experiences, and ideas that enhance collaboration and problem-solving. However, managing a multicultural team presents challenges, including differences in communication styles, values, and expectations, which

can result in misunderstandings or conflicts. Effective management strategies—such as establishing common goals, fostering open communication, and promoting empathy—are necessary to navigate these challenges and ensure that diversity contributes positively to the workplace culture (Bennett, 1993).

The study also identifies several factors influencing staff awareness of cultural diversity. While overall awareness was positive, staff with more experience in diverse environments tended to be more attuned to cultural diversity, likely due to greater exposure to different perspectives and challenges. This suggests that hands-on experience plays a significant role in shaping staff's understanding and application of diversity concepts. In contrast, gender and educational qualification did not significantly affect diversity awareness, indicating that diversity training should focus more on experience and direct engagement with diverse groups, rather than on gender or educational background (Dillman *et al.*, 2014).

Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need for organizational strategies that go beyond awareness. To create a culturally inclusive environment, schools must implement tailored diversity training programs that provide staff with the tools and strategies to engage effectively with diverse teams (Bennett, 1993). These initiatives will help ensure that diversity awareness translates into actionable changes in behavior, workplace interactions, and overall organizational culture.

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