
Teachers' Perceptions of the Educational Leader's Cultural Intelligence in International Schools: A Cross-National Comparative Case Study

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Abstract

This study examined teachers' perceptions of their leaders' Cultural Intelligence (CQ) in two different international schools in different geographical settings. With one international school located in Malta and the other in the Netherlands, this study discovered similarities and differences within the two schools in relation to the mentioned perception. Teachers' perceptions of how their leader strives to cultivate the teachers' CQ were also examined. Case study research was employed, where data were collected and analysed through mixed methods. The research tools used were questionnaires and interviews. Teachers completed questionnaires (N=38) which provided demographic information and a measure of their leader's perceived CQ using the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS). In-depth evidence was derived from interviews (N=10) which triangulated the responses to the CQS. Quantitative and qualitative findings identified teachers' positive perceptions of their leader's CQ. Qualitative data also unravelled how teachers perceive their leaders to have a natural ability to navigate the international environment, fuelled by the trait of openness to new experiences. Interview data also delved into teachers' opinions of how their CQ is being cultivated and could be further enhanced, and the rationale behind such need. The theme of guiding through modelling was also explored through the teachers' and leaders' viewpoints. These findings provide practical implications for educational leaders to enhance the CQ of teachers within their school, which would eventually ameliorate living in an intercultural environment.

Keywords

Teachers' Perceptions, Educational Leadership, Cultural Intelligence, International Education, International Schools

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Introduction

Global events have influenced migration trends resulting in the reshaping of communities. This has led to an increase in multicultural societies, where multiple cultures coexist in one environment (Rey-Von Allmen, 2010). Such situations make cultural differences stand out. Solely bringing people together might not suffice to nurture values and customs needed in an intercultural setting, where the emphasis is on positive interactions between cultures. Through their role and position, educators can be agents of change to further shape culturally pluralistic societies (D'Aprile & Bufalino, 2021). International schools include culturally diverse teacher and student populations, and the success of such institutions relies on understanding and identifying diverse cultures, including their interactions (Estaji & Tabrizi, 2022). Success of institutions is also highly influenced by their leaders (DuBrin, 2016; Hughes et al., 2019; Northouse, 2021), yet despite the increased numbers of international schools (Hayden & Thompson, 1995, 2016), studies of international school leadership are scarce (Hallinger & Lee, 2012). The international setting adds a layer of complexity to challenges otherwise faced by educational leaders, and expectations are raised for educators to develop and grow as well-prepared change agents. This environment requires reflecting on one's cognitive intellect, professionalism and cultural competence, and as such the construct of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) proves essential in such circumstances. This relatively newly developed concept is aimed at exploring how individuals successfully function and operate in a multicultural setting (Ang & Van Dyne, 2009). Nonetheless, diverse settings could potentially influence how such intelligence is perceived and cultivated, and the behaviour of leaders is also highly influenced by their own culture (Tang et al., 2011).

This study encapsulated teachers' opinions in relation to how they perceive their leader's cultural intelligence and is set in two different countries: Malta and the Netherlands. Teachers also provided their opinions of how their leader is contributing to developing their own CQ, as well as how to further enhance this. Furthermore, the review of literature and subsequent discussion reflects the European context, particularly the mentioned countries.

The study addresses the following three research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive the educational leader's cultural intelligence?
2. What are the similarities and differences of teachers' perceptions of the educational leader's cultural intelligence in the two schools?

3. What are the perceived contributions of educational leaders to cultivating teachers' cultural intelligence?

Review of Literature

Cultural Intelligence

Culture is a vastly studied and complex construct. According to Thomas and Inkson (2017), culture is "an organized system of values, attitudes, beliefs and meanings that are related to each other and to the context" (p. 24). Hofstede et al. (2010) compare culture to software when describing culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 6). The iceberg analogy is also commonly associated with culture, illustrating how the visible components of culture are only a small portion of the overall concept (Thomas & Inkson, 2017). Such components differ from one culture to another, leading to cultural differences occurring with respect to "region", "ethnicity", "religion", "gender", "generation" and "class" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 45).

Intelligence is another dynamic construct. According to Sternberg and Detterman (1986), intelligence is an individual's ability to adapt to new situations and acquire knowledge from practices. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, developed by Gardner in the 1970s and 1980s, enhanced the concept of intelligence by shifting it away from a singularity (Davis et al., 2011). Subsequently, Earley and Ang (2003) identified a gap between intelligence and culture, and thus introduced the concept of *Cultural Intelligence* (CQ). With CQ, Earley and Ang intended to answer the question: "Why is it that some people adjust relatively easily, quickly and thoroughly to new cultures but others cannot seem able to do so?" (2003, p. 4). Thus, CQ is defined as "an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings" (Ang & Van Dyne, 2009, p. 3). The theory of CQ is based on the work of Sternberg and Detterman in 1986 (Ang & Van Dyne, 2009; Ang et al., 2011), as CQ comprises four necessary dimensions for its enhancement: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural. Metacognitive CQ refers to observing one's mental processes in relation to culture when communicating in a multicultural setting, whilst cognitive CQ reflects one's own cultural knowledge attained academically or through personal practices. Motivational CQ refers to an individual's motivation and effort to learn about different cultures and to successfully operate in cross-cultural environments. Finally, being concerned

with demonstrating the appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviour in cross-cultural environments falls under the behavioural CQ dimension. As such, there is a natural link between CQ and being in an international environment, resulting in CQ targeting the concrete needs of globalisation (Earley & Ang, 2003). This construct is therefore much needed in the field of international education.

Globalisation and International Education

Globalisation is a multifaceted concept that has created opportunities for working teams that comprise different cultures. This has instigated an upsurge of culturally diverse working environments, making the skill of intercultural collaboration a desirable prerequisite for employment (Collins et al., 2016). The term *intercultural* emphasizes interactions amongst diverse cultures that may result in controlling and resolving disagreements and shaping communities (Rey-Von Allmen, 2010; Portera & Milani, 2021). As such, cultures are brought together in one environment through globalisation, yet intercultural collaboration is needed for these settings to have positive and functional interactions. Hence, this is also vital in international schools where staff and students originate from different home countries. Consequently, intercultural education should not be considered as education of migrants, and instead as the amelioration of living in a culturally diverse society (D'Aprile & Bufalino, 2021; Rey-Von Allmen, 2010). Although there is still ambiguity in defining the term *international education* (Hayden & Thompson, 1995, 2016), Portera and Milani (2021) explain that intercultural education "seeks to combat cultural barriers, discrimination and intolerance, and to promote education for understanding and respect" (p. 53). Intercultural education therefore seeks to address the needs of globalisation by identifying, understanding and appreciating cultural differences and advocating for successful intercultural experiences within different institutions. This success also depends on the crucial role of leaders, as leadership is "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2021, p. 6). Nevertheless, influencing employees requires trust and respect, two values that can manifest themselves differently within diverse cultures. In fact, contrasting ideas happen as various cultures have different ways to deal with similar matters (Bush & Middlewood, 2005), hence posing a challenge when trying to cultivate a school culture in an international setting.

The demands of globalisation have increased the popularity of international schools (Lee et al., 2012), and since being founded in 1800s, there are now

over 13,000 international schools worldwide (ISC Research, 2023). Despite the growing number of international schools (Gibson & Bailey, 2021; Hammad & Shah, 2018; Hayden & Thompson, 1995, 2016; Keller, 2015), there fails to be a clear definition of what renders a school international (Hayden & Thompson, 1995, 2016; Keller, 2015). ISC Research (2023) classifies a school as international when students are taught in English where the host country is not English-speaking or when the curriculum, delivered in English, differs from that of the English-speaking country and the school has international characteristics. Although the word “international” appears in many of these schools’ names, there are also schools that do not include it in their name but are members of organisations that operate worldwide, such as the Council of International Schools and International Baccalaureate Organization (Keller, 2015). Despite being members of such renowned organisations, these schools can sometimes lack the adequate assistance and support for their leaders to guide educators to raise the next culturally pluralistic generation (Keller, 2015). In fact, scholars agree that explicit training to work in the international sector is often not offered (Halicioglu, 2015; Hayden & Thompson, 2013; Vassallo, 2016), even though the international setting complicates the challenges school leaders face (D’Aprile & Bufalino, 2021). Lack of training could be partly due to studies of international school leadership being very limited (Hallinger & Lee, 2012). Particularly in the Maltese context, Bezzina (2018) advocates for educators to have more cultural awareness, also in relation to own biases, in order to nurture skills that enable effective multicultural communication. Since CQ directly targets effective functionality in such settings, researching CQ in relation to educational leadership is critical to improving schools. Nonetheless, even if CQ aids leaders in cultivating an open-minded frame of mind that enhances their leadership (Van Dyne et al., 2010), such efforts are rendered futile if their influence is not reaching teachers.

The Context of the Netherlands and Malta

Cultural diversity has long existed within the Dutch population as a result of a history of colonisation and migration, including the arrival of large numbers of labour and colonial immigrants in the 1960s (Leeman, 2008). The Netherlands was part of a coalition of countries after World War II, and hence one of the first members of the European Union (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.). By law, education is decentralised as schools have the liberty to make decisions that affect the curriculum and testing strategies (Sun & de Jong, 2007). Intercultural education has been obligatory since the 1980s, when the Netherlands was

confirmed to be a multicultural society (Leeman & Koeven, 2019). According to the International School Database (n.d.), there are 51 international schools in the Netherlands, located in 10 different cities.

On the other hand, Malta's geographical location led to different empires colonising the island, with remains from such periods evident within the country's culture (Bezzina, 2018). The Roman Catholic Apostolic Church has influence on the Maltese society, with the constitution of Malta also mandating that schools must offer education of such religion (Constitution of Malta, 1964). Nonetheless, the most recent inclusion policy by the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) aims at catering for "Cognitive & Learning Diversity", "Multiculturalism & Language Diversity", "Religion & Belief Diversity", "Socio-Economic Diversity", "Gender & Sexual Diversity" and "Physical & Psychological Diversity" (MEDE, 2019, p. 25). This is an attempt at harbouring *equity*, which together with *quality*, are pillars of the education policy in Malta (Bezzina, 2018). According to Global Citizen Solutions (2022), there are three international schools in Malta, yet John Catt's International School Search (n.d.) reports six international schools. Such discrepancy in numbers could be due to the aforementioned misinterpretation of what constitutes a school to be international.

Research Design and Methodology

The aim of the research was to explore teachers' perceptions of their educational leader's CQ at two different schools, compare these perceptions between the two schools, and explore teachers' perceptions in relation to cultivating their own CQ. For this study, case study methodology was adopted, with one school in Malta (School A) and the other in the Netherlands (School B).

Data collection and analysis followed a mixed-methods design. The quantitative approach included questionnaires that aimed to explore general teachers' perceptions using the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS). The CQS comprises 20 items subdivided into the four dimensions of CQ: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural. Each statement presents a different concept, is concise and is written using positive and uncomplicated language (Ang et al., 2007). Participants provided a level of agreement for each statement using a Likert Scale. The qualitative data were gathered through 10 semi-structured interviews, including four teachers from each school and their educational leader. Following data collection and analysis, convergent parallel design was used. This design entails analysing data from each

approach separately, and then amalgamating the two data sets (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In fact, quantitative data gathered from the wider audience was converged with interview data after both sets were individually analysed. This enabled the triangulation of evidence that confirmed general teachers' perceptions obtained from questionnaires with more in-depth understanding from interviews. The findings are presented in the form of a thematic analysis divided into four themes.

Table 1

Themes with their Respective Definition

Theme	Definition
Theme 1: Perceptions of Cultural Intelligence	Teachers' insights and opinions of their leader's CQ.
Theme 2: Navigating the international environment	Teachers' perceptions in relation to their leader's ability to manage an intercultural setting.
Theme 3: Teachers' Cultural Intelligence	Teachers' perceptions in relation to their own CQ, including teachers' perceptions of how their leader is currently supporting them in developing the teachers' CQ, teachers' perceptions of new initiatives their leader can take to improve the teachers' CQ, and the rationale behind the need to cultivate and enhance teachers' CQ.
Theme 4: Guidance through modelling	In relation to the construct of CQ, how educational leaders offer direction to and influence their team by demonstrating behaviour.

Results and Discussion

Evidence gathered from the questionnaires and interviews allowed for a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative insight on teachers' perceptions. Quantitative data generated descriptive statistics that provided an insight into the general overview. The quantitative sample comprised 38 questionnaire responses from a population of 98 teachers, hence an overall response rate of 38.8%. The identity of the schools and of interviewees was kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. The qualitative data were derived from interviews with four teachers and their educational leader at each school: Claire, Lara, Ian, Barbara and their leader Roger at School A, and Nick, Peter, Tessa, Rachel and their leader Martin at School B. By analysing the verbatim transcriptions of all interviews, the researcher noticed patterns of codes that were eventually grouped together to form each of the four themes. Table 1 illustrates the themes with their respective definition.

Theme 1: Perceptions of Cultural Intelligence

The first theme addresses the teachers' perceptions of the educational leaders' CQ and showcases similarities and differences between the two schools, hence providing answers to the first and second research questions. The mean score of the overall CQ for School A was 5.1, whilst for School B this was 5.8. With the maximum score being 7, such scores are relatively high for both schools, with stronger perceptions existing in School B. As indicative from the discourse used, interviewees also had positive comments to share about their leaders' CQ. For example, Ian stated that "He's [the leader] well aware of how schools work, and I mean how different cultures interact. And the way he speaks and the way he behaves and walks and talks, he seems very familiar with this." Lara also emphasized the leader's awareness by mentioning that "If I say something related to a particular culture, he'll know. Like you know recently he knew it was the Chinese New Year, or if I might say something about a student, he knows what I'm saying." Similar responses also emerged from interviewees at School B. The overall perceptions included terms such as "open-minded", "knowledgeable", "good listener" and "awareness", thus indicating a positive perception of the leader's CQ. Positive indications of the leader's CQ were also evident in the leaders' responses in relation to their own CQ. Roger commented that, "[w]ith colleagues I seem to have kind of a broader general cultural understanding than a lot of people and again I don't really know exactly where it comes from", whilst Martin mentioned that "[I]n certain conversations you realize how much you know when you talk to someone who doesn't work in

an international environment, but they just work in a Dutch office or, you know, a neighbour or something."

Theme 2: Navigating the International Environment

The second theme discusses how the educational leaders navigate the international environment and presents similarities and differences between the two schools, hence also targeting the first two research questions. Interviewees seem to credit their leaders with having a natural ability to navigate the international environment. Responses about the leader in School A included that "he does not need to adjust, it is normal for him" (Claire), and that he intervenes accordingly in relation to cultural issues. Similar responses were given in relation to the leader at School B. For example, Tessa mentioned that "they've [the educational leaders] been there for so long so I think that's just a natural way of communicating. I think communicating with different cultures is something that they do in an unconscious way, just natural." Peter describes his leader Martin as "very much open and honest and adaptable", hinting that adjusting behaviour when interacting with people from different cultures relies on natural and innate characteristics. The educational leaders also hinted towards characteristics such as curiosity and open-mindedness when answering the same question about themselves:

When you hear of differences, my first reaction as well would be "Oh well OK tell me more about this" like you know I want to know more, what you know, why is this a cultural thing, you know, where does it come from and I think that out of sincerity and appreciation rather than judgment of like "oh that culture does this that's very strange." (Roger)

I'm always trying to be on the backfoot when interacting. So, I let them give me signs, knowledge, about how I should react, about how I should approach them and how far they're prepared to open up or not... making sure that all of the conversation goes smoothly, and you don't create offence and so on, you do this fairly automatically as a mature educated adult. (Martin)

Hence, these perceptions agree with Thomas and Inkson's (2017) statement that characteristics that people possess make them intuitively susceptible to developing CQ, namely openness to new experience.

Theme 3: Teachers' Cultural Intelligence

This theme targets the third research question. Participants from both schools mentioned that there is encouragement to include cultural awareness within the lessons, and that teachers are mindful of students' cultural background, especially in relation to their language ability. Cultural events are celebrated in both schools, and staff is encouraged to join. Examples include a day celebrating world languages in School B, and an event at School A celebrating food and traditions of different cultures. Teachers also show emotional support to students in relation to the political and social situations within their home country that might affect their socio-emotional wellbeing. This outcome agrees with Debono's (2020) findings, where teachers also had positive perceptions towards a multicultural student population yet contradicts the reported feeling of "insensitivity towards multiculturalism" (p. 100), as the participants were very positive in relation to the overall feeling of empathy and support provided by the whole school. Nonetheless, perceptions from teachers at both schools share the similarity of not having structured measures in place that specifically target the cultivation of teachers' CQ. In relation to this, Nick explicitly mentioned how small initiatives can be taken, such as promoting teacher agency by encouraging teachers to present their cultures in short presentations before staff meetings. Ian also believes that such events would help on two levels: having more awareness on issues pertaining surface culture such as cultural norms and customs, as well as learning about deeper cultural aspects, such as communication styles and attitudes in general.

Cultural differences brought about by an international setting did not seem to create issues between staff members. Nonetheless, there are experiences of cultural differences between teachers and students, parents and teachers, or between the students themselves. Such examples include the perceptions of hierarchy and independence, and differences in communication styles. Specific examples included students being less inclined to ask questions as they perceive their teachers very high in the educational hierarchy, and how certain cultures perceive hierarchy differently in relation to gender roles. Differences in perceptions of independence were evident during school trips, as parents from different cultures had dissimilar opinions regarding the free time and level of independence students had whilst abroad. Teachers also mentioned how some students and parents are more direct when communicating with educators, which can sometimes be perceived as impolite. These issues exemplify that CQ is needed when working in an international environment, as for example cultural

awareness can identify the role of culture in certain issues.

Theme 4: Guidance Through Modelling

Teachers showcased confidence in their leader to discuss pertaining issues, thus displaying a general feeling of trust. For example, Martin seems to be an authority figure that people consider a role model. This can be seen from Rachel's comment that her leader "sort of sets the tone for what's expected of all staff, not just teaching staff and the students. He's understood, he's just sort of the backbone of the school." The leaders reciprocated such feeling which could possibly explain why culture was not of much concern on the agenda of professional development days. This was seen in Roger's comment about having a positive feeling about the general atmosphere within the school, including the interactions between teachers and students in relation to culture. Furthermore, both leaders were still classroom teachers and were hence more able to provide authentic modelling by being in touch with the realities of the classroom.

Limitations

The limitation of this study naturally includes the small sample size that hinders external validity. Additionally, given the nature of this comparative study, the researcher strived to find two schools with similar characteristics that fulfilled the definition of international schools as provided by ISC Research (2023). However, differences between the schools still existed and could potentially have affected the results of the study. Furthermore, the researcher had no influence over the questionnaire participants. Enthusiastic teachers could be the only ones who completed the questionnaires, hence possibly not reflecting the entire teacher population from where fewer positive results could have been derived. This is also the case for the interview sample, since some teachers were willing to participate and self-selected themselves when the call for participants was made. Furthermore, questionnaire responses also shed light on a limitation of the CQS, as a number of teachers opted for a 4 out of 7 when unsure about their leader's characteristics. Some interviewees also commented that providing more detailed answers would require observing their leader under specific circumstances. Another limitation involved the issue of having teachers evaluate their own leader. Although anonymity was provided for questionnaires and confidentiality for interviews, teachers could have still felt uncomfortable to provide entirely truthful answers.

Conclusion

A key area that emerged is that teachers' positive perceptions of their leaders build trust between the two stakeholders. This is essential, especially when leaders are providing guidance through modelling and when culturally responsive training is lacking. Evidence from this small-scale study suggests that teachers and leaders consider innate characteristics and skills to contribute towards enhancing CQ. These findings also suggest understanding the needs of the teachers and community members before planning professional development courses.

Educational leaders are responsible for cultivating a school environment conducive of positive experiences. With the increase of pluricultural societies, this responsibility is extended to incorporate positive intercultural experiences as well. The findings presented in this study showcase the importance of the leaders' influence on teachers, as the latter rely on their leaders for assistance pertaining to cultural issues. While the sample is not representative of other schools, educational leaders could benefit from the results of this study in relation to how teachers' CQ could be further enhanced, and to learn from the teachers' and leaders' perceptions.

Theoretical Implications

There are several ways how this study contributes to the literature. Evidence indicates that teachers and leaders credit personal and professional international experiences to the development of CQ. This confirms that past experiences contribute to the construction of knowledge and that opinions are shaped through interpretations of daily circumstances (Leavy, 2017). In light of the previously discussed literature, this could suggest that for some individuals, bringing people together through globalisation can intuitively contribute to thriving within an international environment, and such experiences contribute to the further development of CQ. Furthermore, the present findings confirm the presence of cultural differences within a multicultural environment, particularly within school communities. Such differences may sometimes introduce a sense of hostility in relation to perceived impoliteness, and thus emphasizes the importance of enhancing one's CQ.

Practical Implications for Educational Leaders

Findings of this study include teachers' authentic and practical suggestions on how their own CQ could be improved. These can be used by educational

leaders when systematically planning school events or professional development for teachers. Multiple teachers mentioned the importance of empowering themselves, and students, by having agency and opportunity to present their culture. The importance of following up on previous initiatives was also mentioned, together with the need to have more opportunities to celebrate culture. Cultural awareness should, however, not be restricted solely to components of surface culture such as food and traditions but should also delve deeper into cultural components such as values, beliefs, thought patterns and ethics. This could take place by having members of different cultures present and/or debating a topic through the lens of their respective cultures. It is vital for this to happen within a non-judgemental environment in order to further raise cultural awareness as well as contribute to professional development. Such initiative would truly encompass the diversity and open-mindedness expected especially by the recent inclusion policy by MEDE (2019). Discussions could contribute to enhancing different dimensions of CQ such as cognitive and behavioural, and can instigate motivation to learn and inquire. Furthermore, some teachers from School B mentioned how a corner of their interactive whiteboard is dedicated to listing cultural events pertaining to the respective date. A similar approach can be taken by other schools, where, for example, a monthly class activity could be decorating a classroom or a hall with a calendar with cultural events, and both staff members and students can participate. This could raise awareness that further contributes to cognitive CQ, whilst simultaneously creating opportunities for collaboration that can improve behavioural CQ and the comprehension of the communication styles of different cultures. Furthermore, with today's ease for interconnectedness, leaders from different schools could communicate in relation to when such events are happening, and interested staff could have more opportunities to attend activities. This could potentially stimulate ideas for schools that are lacking such events, especially in small schools or departments that might not have the necessary human or physical resources.

The success of such initiatives requires the support of educational leaders who, according to this study, have a natural ability to navigate the international environment. A salient outcome of this study is that teachers had positive perceptions of their leaders and considered them to be role models. This should provide motivation for leaders to use their experience, knowledge, and position to ensure structure, continuity and coherency of meaningful initiatives that target the enhancement of CQ. Evidence from this study and

from recent literature suggests that such initiatives are vital, especially when there seems to be a lack of training for working in an international environment, and disagreement could happen through misunderstood cultural differences. Through such initiatives, intercultural education could continue to ameliorate living in a multicultural society that continues to truly become intercultural.

Recommendations for Future Research

Both leaders interviewed in this study are classroom teachers, and as such, this could be allowing them to provide more practical and authentic guidance. Based on this result, the researcher recommends educational researchers to further explore the possibility of having leaders still in touch with the realities of the classroom. Additional positive results could instigate policymakers to re-evaluate the roles and responsibilities of educational leaders. Furthermore, future research could address this topic in the context of state schools, where the teacher and student populations are inevitably different. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the perceptions of teachers who did not willingly chose to have an intercultural audience.

Notes on Contributor

Juanita Arnaud is of Maltese origin and graduated with a Bachelor of Education (Hons) specializing in Mathematics, from the University of Malta. After briefly working in Malta, she moved to the Netherlands where she has taught Mathematics in international schools for the past eight years.

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