

# Integrating Culture into Education for Sustainable Development at Tertiary Level: Challenges and Opportunities.

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## ABSTRACT

Education for sustainable development is widely recognized as essential for building a resilient and equitable future. However, its effectiveness depends not only on policies and curricula but also on its grounding in culture. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of integrating culture into education for sustainable development at tertiary level in Zimbabwe. Drawing on an interpretive paradigm and qualitative methods, through an idiographic, including interviews and focus group discussions that were held with thirty participants. The study highlights barriers such as resistance to change, linguistic diversity, resource constraints, gender inequality, and entrenched social hierarchies. At the same time, it identifies opportunities of preserving indigenous knowledge, enhancing student engagement, promoting diversity and global citizenship, ethical grounding through cultural philosophies such as Ubuntu, resilience against globalization, and stronger connections between global sustainability goals and local realities. The findings suggest that culturally responsive curricula, inclusive language policies, equitable resource allocation, and community engagement are critical for transforming ESD into a holistic and impactful framework. By embracing cultural diversity, tertiary institutions can ensure that sustainability is not perceived as an external imposition but as a lived practice rooted in identity and heritage.

**Keywords:** Education for Sustainable Development, Culture, Indigenous Knowledge, Ubuntu & Gender Equity

## INTRODUCTION

Education is often the key to building a sustainable future, however, its effectiveness depends on more than just policies and curricula, it must be rooted in culture. Culture shapes the way communities understand the environment, value resources, and pass knowledge across generations. When education for sustainable development embraces cultural traditions, languages, and worldviews, it becomes more inclusive, relevant, and impactful. From indigenous ecological practices to community-based learning, culture provides the foundation that transforms sustainability from abstract theory into lived reality. Culture provides the lens through which sustainability is interpreted, ensuring that education is not only informative but also relevant, inclusive, and transformative. Without cultural grounding, sustainability risks are being perceived as an external imposition rather than a lived practice. Exploring the role of culture in education for sustainable development reveals how traditions, diversity, and community knowledge can strengthen global efforts toward resilience and equity in education.

### Definition of Culture

For the purposes of this study, culture is operationalised as the shared values, beliefs, practices, and worldviews transmitted through social institutions such as family, education, and community. It encompasses indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and philosophies such as Ubuntu, which shape how individuals and communities understand sustainability, interact with their environment, and define collective responsibility. In this sense, culture is treated not as abstract heritage but as a lived framework that informs educational practice and the integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (Roberts 2025; Verick, 2025 & Goraya, 2020).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Ubuntu, an African philosophy emphasizing interconnectedness and collective well-being, provides an ethical grounding for ESD. It frames sustainability not as an external imposition but as a lived practice rooted in identity and heritage (Bukunmi, 2024). It is linked with indigenous ecological practices, resource management traditions, and communal stewardship embody sustainability principles. When these are incorporated into curricula, they enrich education with context-specific solutions and validates local knowledge (Tom, Sumida Huaman & McCarty, 2019; Malapane, Chanza & Musakwa, 2024). However, literature highlights barriers such as resistance to change, linguistic diversity, resource constraints, gender inequality, and entrenched social hierarchies. These challenges complicate efforts to embed cultural perspectives into standardized curricula (Roberts, 2025; Goraya, 2020). Conversely, integrating culture into ESD enhances student engagement, promotes diversity and global citizenship, and strengthens resilience against globalization. It fosters authentic sustainability education by connecting global goals with local realities (Starkey, 2023; Toit-Brits, 2022).

### Elements of Culture

Frame (2017) alludes that even if we set aside definitions of culture as linked to the arts, heritage and intellectual excellence, and situate ourselves in the descriptive anthropological tradition to reduce conflict, culture has its elements that are used such as knowledge, norms, practices and representations, even attitudes and values, but they are all linked with the particular social group and they have different roles to play, such that norms as the cultural products, informally govern individuals' behaviour and understandings in the society (Cole, 2017). Therefore, norms are observed by the individuals of a culture who if deviate from it are taken as victim of deviance and anomy, for example handshaking between the contesting and competing players after game. Thus, norms are also referred to as being usual, typical or standard.

Values describe the personal qualities we choose to embody to guide our actions; the sort of person we want to be; the manner in which we treat ourselves and others, and our interaction with the world around us. They provide the general guidelines for conduct (Cole, 2017). Values in a narrow sense is that which is good, desirable, or worthwhile. Values are the motive behind purposeful action. They are the ends to which we act and come in many forms. Personal values are personal beliefs about right and wrong and may or may not be considered moral (Mintz, 2017). Value can be defined as enduring belief upon which a person acts. They are similar to attitudes and beliefs in that they have cognitive, emotional, and behavioural parts (Davis, 2021). However, Limthanakom, Lauffer, Mujtaba and Murphy (2011) suggest that cultural values are more enduring and long-lasting than either beliefs or attitudes and are accepted by religions or societies and reflect what is important in each context. Thus, values are essential to ethics, which is concerned with human actions, and the choice of those actions. They are general standards and may be regarded as higher order norms. Cultural values vary from society to society just like norms. however, they are shaped by religion, morality and ethics observed by the people of those culture. History also puts considerable influence on values of a society and that are often attributed with the measures of goodness and desirability and basic and fundamental beliefs that guide or motivate attitudes or actions. They help us to determine what is important to us in the society (Cole, 2017).

Beliefs, according to the tradition in philosophy, are states of mind that have the property of being about things in the world, as well as abstract things, events in the past and things only imagined (Churchland & Churchland, 2013). They are mental representation of an attitude positively oriented towards the likelihood of something being true. Belief in a culture can be of superstitious as well as religious nature. They erupt from the religious teachings most of the time but that not always the case (Cole, 2017). This suggests that a culture might have beliefs which are based on historical practices and folkways of a society. A common example comes from the traditional Hindu societies which are considered full of people with strict belief in superstitions. Churchland and Churchland (2013) further define customs as traditional and widely accepted ways of behaving or doing somethings that are specific to a particular society. Customs constitute an important part of any culture. They are commonly accepted manner of behaving or doing something in a particular society, place or time. Each culture, society and religion have their customs. For example, in some countries bowing is a way of showing respect and gratitude.

## **Integrating Culture into Education for sustainable development**

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping how communities understand and practice sustainability. It encompasses traditions, values, languages, and worldviews that influence how people interact with their environment and each other. Education for sustainable development that integrates cultural perspectives ensures that learning is not only about scientific knowledge or global frameworks, but also about respecting local identities and lived experiences. By acknowledging culture, education becomes more inclusive and meaningful, bridging the gap between global sustainability goals and local realities.

One of the most powerful contributions of culture to education for sustainable development is the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge systems (Tom, Sumida Huaman & McCarty, 2019). Many communities have long-standing practices of resource management, ecological stewardship, and communal living that embody sustainability principles. When these cultural practices are incorporated into formal education, they enrich curricula with practical, context-specific solutions (Nepal, 2024). Thus, traditional farming methods in Agriculture, water conservation techniques, or community rituals around resource use can provide students with tangible lessons that connect sustainability to everyday life. Culture fosters a sense of belonging and responsibility that strengthens education for sustainable development. When students see their cultural values reflected in what they are taught, they are more likely to engage actively and take ownership of sustainability initiatives (Starkey, 2023). This cultural grounding nurtures respect for diversity, encourages collaboration across communities, and promotes ethical decision-making. Ultimately, education for sustainable development that embraces culture empowers individuals to act not just as global citizens but as custodians of their own heritage, ensuring that sustainability is both locally relevant and globally impactful.

Culture influences how societies perceive resources, the environment, and collective responsibility. Indigenous communities emphasize communal living and stewardship of nature, values that align closely with sustainability principles (Milfont, Schultz, 2016). When education incorporates these cultural perspectives, it becomes more than a transfer of knowledge and it becomes a continuation of identity and heritage. Cultural foundations ensure that sustainability is not taught as a foreign concept however, as an extension of existing practices. By embedding cultural values into curricula, educators can foster a sense of belonging and responsibility, motivating students to act as custodians of both their heritage and the planet (Toit-Brits, Charlene, 2022). Cultural foundation is the bedrock upon which education for sustainable development must be built. It shapes how individuals and communities perceive the environment, use resources, and define their responsibilities towards future generations. This suggests that culture provides the values, traditions, and narratives that give sustainability meaning in everyday life. Thus, education acknowledges, integrates cultural perspectives and transforms sustainability from a technical concept into a lived practice that resonates with students' identities and experiences.

Culture supports sustainability in education through its role of shaping ethical frameworks, that include African philosophies such as Ubuntu, which emphasize interconnectedness and collective well-being, values that align closely with sustainable living (Bukunmi, 2024). When culture is embedded in education, students are more likely to engage with sustainability and reflect their own traditions, languages, and community practices. Thus, fostering a sense of ownership and motivating students to apply sustainable principles in their daily lives. In this way, culture acts as a powerful connector between global sustainability goals and local contexts, ensuring both meaningful and transformative education. Similarly, culture provides resilience in the face of modern challenges (Terrana & Al-Delamy, 2023). As globalization and modernization threaten to erode traditional practices, education for sustainable development rooted in culture helps preserve valuable knowledge systems while adapting them to contemporary needs. It empowers communities to draw on their heritage while engaging with new technologies and global frameworks. This balances tradition and innovation, and strengthens sustainability efforts, ensuring both scientifically sound, socially and culturally sustainable.

One of the most powerful contributions of culture to education for sustainable development is the preservation and transmission of indigenous knowledge systems. (Malapane, Chanza, & Musakwa, 2024). These systems often contain centuries of ecological wisdom, from traditional techniques to rituals that regulate resource use. Incorporating such practices into education enriches curricula with practical, context-specific solutions that resonate with students (Mohanl & Majhi, 2024). This approach not only validates local knowledge but also

bridges the gap between global sustainability goals and local realities, making education more impactful and authentic. Therefore, culture fosters respect for diversity and promotes global citizenship. Education for sustainable development that embraces cultural diversity encourages students to appreciate multiple perspectives, collaborate across communities, and engage in ethical decision-making. By reflecting cultural values in teaching, education empowers individuals to see themselves as part of a larger global effort while remaining grounded in their local identity. This dual perspective of local relevance and global responsibility creates a powerful synergy. Hence, students become equipped not only with technical knowledge but also with cultural empathy, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to sustainability initiatives worldwide.

## Objectives

- a. Examine challenges of integrating culture into education for sustainable development at tertiary level.
- b. Explore the opportunities of integrating culture into education for sustainable development at tertiary level.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), as articulated by Ladson-Billings (1995), which emphasizes the integration of students' cultural identities, experiences, and knowledge systems into educational practice. CRP asserts that effective teaching must promote academic success, develop cultural competence, and foster critical consciousness. Within the context of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), CRP provides a lens for understanding how cultural traditions, indigenous knowledge, and community practices can be embedded into curricula to make sustainability education meaningful, inclusive, and transformative. By situating ESD within CRP, the study recognizes that culture is not peripheral but central to learning. Students engage more deeply when their cultural values and worldviews are reflected in educational content. This framework highlights the need for curricula that validate indigenous ecological practices, communal stewardship, and philosophies such as Ubuntu, while simultaneously equipping learners to critique inequities that hinder sustainable futures. Complementing CRP, Decolonial Theory (Mignolo, 2011) was employed to interrogate the dominance of Western epistemologies in sustainability education. Decolonial perspectives emphasize delinking from Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies and re-centering local, indigenous, and marginalized voices. This is particularly relevant in Zimbabwe, where standardized curricula often marginalize cultural diversity. Decolonial theory strengthens the analysis by framing cultural integration not merely as inclusion, but as a necessary rebalancing of power and knowledge in education. Together, these frameworks provide a robust analytical foundation. CRP ensures that cultural relevance is foregrounded in pedagogy, while Decolonial Theory critiques structural inequities and epistemic dominance. This dual lens enables a nuanced exploration of how cultural norms interact with ESD, highlighting both challenges (resistance to change, linguistic diversity, entrenched hierarchies) and opportunities (indigenous knowledge preservation, Ubuntu philosophy, global-local synergy).

## METHODOLOGY

This study was underpinned by an interpretive paradigm, which emphasizes understanding how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences. The paradigm was appropriate for exploring how participants interpret and attach cultural values to education for sustainable development. It aligns with symbolic interactionism and idiographic inquiry, allowing phenomena to be understood from the perspective of particular people in specific contexts (Denzin & Giardina, 2016; Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015). A qualitative approach was employed to facilitate rich discussions on the integration of culture into education for sustainable development. The design was idiographic, committed to capturing experiential phenomena as understood by participants in their own contexts. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, which provided nuanced insights into cultural perspectives and practices. The researcher purposively sampled 5 village heads from each of six districts, identified as under-resourced during the Seasonal Livelihood Programme facilitated through a Memorandum of Understanding between the university and a Non-Governmental Organization. This yielded an initial pool of 30 participants, selected for their cultural authority and knowledge of community practices relevant to education. Village heads were chosen for their leadership roles and cultural expertise, which positioned them as key informants on the integration of culture into education. Sampling was explicitly purposive, ensuring inclusion of participants with direct knowledge of cultural practices in education. Representation across six districts strengthened contextual relevance and allowed for diverse

cultural perspectives to be captured. Data analysis procedures followed a systematic qualitative framework where all interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim. An inductive thematic coding framework was applied, allowing categories to emerge organically from participant narratives. Thematic analysis was conducted iteratively, with themes aligned to the study objectives (challenges and opportunities). Reliability measures included peer debriefing and triangulation across interviews and focus groups, enhancing credibility and trustworthiness of findings.

## FINDINGS

The findings of this study were presented thematically, where the themes were derived from the objectives. These were the challenges of integrating culture into education for sustainable development at tertiary level and the opportunities of integrating culture into education for sustainable development at tertiary level.

### Cultural Resistance and Fear of Identity Loss

The interviews, the study found out that culture holds change resistance in traditional practices that may conflict with sustainability goals especially on resource use, consumption patterns and many more. It also came out from the findings that resistance to change is caused by fear of the unknown. One of the participants said that:

*“...Resistance arises when sustainability is perceived as undermining cultural identity where their inheritance would be destroyed.”*

This suggests that there would be a challenge of resistance to change due to personal reasons such as protection of their traditional practices that are deeply rooted in their culture. However, this isn't about stubbornness for its own sake, but rather a deeply rooted human tendency to favour the familiar and the understood. Most people find comfort in routine and predictability. Change disrupts that, forcing people out of their established patterns and into uncertain territory. This discomfort can manifest as resistance (Toit-Brits, Charlene, 2022).

The study made known that cultural perspectives are diversified and education systems always find it difficult to integrate multiple cultural viewpoints, since the Zimbabwean curriculum is a one-size-fits-all, being taught to multicultural students and by multicultural lecturers, thus, sustainability curriculum risks marginalizing local knowledge and traditions. It was also revealed from this study through the interviews that Zimbabwean colleges and universities prioritize homogenous curricula as compared to culturally receptive styles, limiting the integration cultural knowledge. This implies that colleges and universities are multicultural institutions and students learning in those institutions are coming from different cultures who then adopt the organizational culture. Standardized curricula establish clear benchmarks for multicultural students' achievement, making it easier to evaluate the effectiveness of schools, teachers, and education systems as a whole. This standardized curriculum drives educators to maintain high teaching standards and ensures that no student is left behind, as it provides insights into educational disparities and informs decisions on resource allocation (Roberts, 2025).

It was established from this study that by integrating culture in education for sustainable development, brings barriers in communication because of different languages being spoken by different cultures. It was also revealed that balancing global versus local priorities Global sustainability frameworks (like UN SDGs) may clash with local cultural practices, creating tension between universal goals and community realities. One participant said that:

*“...Education for sustainable development often uses technical or western languages so that students are able to follow instructions to make project for sustainable development and these can separate them from different cultural backgrounds.”*

The above sentiments suggest that western languages are widely spoken and understood, making them a common language of instruction in many educational systems. This approach aims to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds can access and understand the curriculum, regardless of their native language (UNESCO, 2025). Western language helps students connect with others on a deeper level, which is useful in both education and career development (Shannon, 2025).

The study revealed that resources such as providing adequate school infrastructure, teaching and learning materials of different languages from different cultures hinder the effective implementation of the integration of culture into sustainable education at basic education level in the country. This suggests that integrating culture into education for sustainable development needs a lot of resources such as human capital where teachers for diversified cultures would be trained and their remuneration, and lack of classroom to separate students according to their cultures to be taught. In accordance with the integration of culture into education for sustainable development and the different cultural needs, budgets do not cater for the purchase of materials needed in the teaching of students with different learning needs or for students with visual and hearing impairments like tape cassettes, headphones, braille machines, tactile maps, large print books, sign language of different languages (Mbibeh, 2013)

The study established that integrating culture into education for sustainable development widespread restrictions on women's economic participation. Traditional gender roles often confine women to domestic responsibilities, preventing them from contributing to formal economic sectors. One participant explained that:

“... Women would be neglected again, and gender gap expanded, with greater gender inequality, opening the gap in women's labour force participation and decrease economic output.”

The above findings imply that integrating culture into education for sustainable development would discriminate female students from pursuing certain subjects like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics creating long-term consequences for innovation, technological advancement and working. Thus, gender discrimination and role restrictions that often-confined women to domestic responsibilities, preventing them from contributing to formal economic sectors. This would have a negative impact on the economic development of the country, if half the population is excluded or limited in their economic participation, a country loses enormous productive potential. Research consistently shows that countries with higher female labour force participation experience faster economic growth and development (Verick, 2025).

The findings revealed that the most persistent barrier in integrating cultural values into education for sustainable development is the caste system, which creates rigid social hierarchies based on birth rather than merit or ability. This assigns individuals to specific social groups that determine their occupation, social interactions, and life opportunities affecting development. One participant alluded that:

“... The caste system also creates barriers to social mobility, entrepreneurship, and innovation. It limits market competition by restricting who can enter certain trades or professions, ultimately reducing economic efficiency and growth potential.”

The results suggest that caste system constrains social mobility by limiting access to education, wealth, and positions of influence. It impedes entrepreneurship through restricted credit, network exclusion, and social stigma, suppresses innovation by causing suboptimal talent allocation and underutilization of highly productI have individuals from marginalized castes. Even when legal frameworks or market liberalization exist, residual social norms and network effects maintain caste-driven disparities, producing a persistent drag on overall economic efficiency and inclusive development (Goraya, 2020).

### **Preservation and Transmission of Indigenous Knowledge**

The study established that integrating cultural values in education for sustainable development brings about stewardship, mutuality, and reverence for nature. Leveraging these values makes sustainability education more authentic, impactful and promotes inclusivity and equity. One of the interviewees alluded that:

“... By recognizing cultural diversity ensures that sustainability education is not just about ecology but also about social justice, identity, and community empowerment.”

The above sentiments suggest that cultural values into education nurtures a sense of responsibility for the planet, encourages cooperation and respect among people and deepens appreciation for the natural world. When education connects with students' cultural experiences and community knowledge, it feels more relevant and genuine. This authenticity engages students more deeply and makes sustainability ideas resonate beyond the

classroom. Recognizing and valuing diverse cultural perspectives ensures that no group's knowledge or traditions are left out. This creates a more inclusive learning environment, giving equal respect to all cultural backgrounds and promoting social equity in education. In essence, education for sustainable development becomes more effective and meaningful when it respects and builds upon the cultural foundations of the people it serves (Pauw, Gericke, Olsson & Berglund, 2015). Thus, turning sustainability from an abstract concept into a shared, lived practice rooted in community wisdom and values (Hofstad, 2023).

It was found out from the study that integrating culture in education for sustainable development strengthens local knowledge systems and indigenous practices such as traditional farming and water conservation provide practical models of sustainability that can enrich modern curricula. The study also established that integrating culture into education for sustainable development encourages long-term behavioural change if sustainability is tied to cultural identity and students are more likely to adopt and maintain sustainable practices beyond the classroom. It also builds global citizenship and fosters empathy and cross-cultural understanding, preparing students to tackle sustainability challenges collaboratively across borders.

From the above findings, strengthening local knowledge systems and indigenous practices acts as a catalyst for social mobility, entrepreneurship, and innovation, particularly where caste or social hierarchies constrain opportunities. The empirical, adaptive, and culturally embedded nature of these systems enables marginalized communities to generate income, participate meaningfully in socio-economic decision-making, and develop innovations rooted in local realities. Policy frameworks, ethical benefit-sharing, community-led documentation, and integration of indigenous knowledge with formal education and scientific research are essential to maximize these outcomes. This approach simultaneously advances sustainable development, cultural preservation, and the empowerment of historically disadvantaged populations (Chaudhari, 2024).

## CONCLUSION

Culture is not a peripheral element of education for sustainable development foundation, however, it holds change resistance in traditional practices that may conflict with sustainability goals on resource use in a one-size-fits-all, curriculum. Integrating culture in education for sustainable development, brings barriers in communication, challenges of providing adequate school infrastructure and teaching and learning materials of different languages. It also brings about the issues of caste system, inequality and inequity in economic participation. Contrary, by embedding cultural traditions, values, and knowledge systems into teaching, education becomes more inclusive, relevant and transformative. It empowers students to act as both global citizens and custodians of their heritage, ensuring that sustainability is lived rather than imposed. In a world facing complex environmental and social challenges, recognizing the role of culture in education for sustainable development is essential for building resilient, equitable and sustainable futures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### The study recommends:

- Establishing consultative forums with community leaders, students, and faculty to co-create sustainability modules that respect cultural identity.
- Start with small, localized case studies (traditional farming practices) to demonstrate compatibility between culture and sustainability.
- Introduce elective courses on indigenous knowledge systems alongside mainstream sustainability content.
- Develop assessment tools that measure both academic achievement and cultural engagement, avoiding homogenized benchmarks.
- Produce multilingual teaching materials (Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, etc.) for sustainability topics.
- Encourage student projects in local languages to validate cultural expression within sustainability education.
- Create cultural resource centres within universities to house indigenous knowledge archives, oral histories, and community-led documentation.
- Mainstream gender audits into curriculum planning to identify and eliminate discriminatory practices.

- Adopt merit-based admission and progression policies that prioritize talent over social background.
- Integrate traditional ecological practices (water conservation, communal stewardship) into sustainability curricula.
- Institutionalize Ubuntu philosophy as a cross-cutting value in student orientation and leadership training.
- Establish a Cultural Integration Committee within each university to oversee ESD implementation.
- Monitor and evaluate cultural integration outcomes through annual reports, feeding into national education policy reviews.

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