

CULTURE AS A FOUNDATION FOR LEARNING STRATEGY INNOVATION: A CASE STUDY FROM IHOSY, MADAGASCAR

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how local culture serves as a foundation for learning strategy innovation in Ihosy, Madagascar, where schools operate within strong communal traditions and limited educational resources. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted in three public secondary schools and one community learning center, selected for their active engagement with local cultural practices. A total of 24 participants, including school principals, teachers, students, parents or community elders, and education officers, were purposively and snowball-selected to capture diverse perspectives on teaching, learning, and cultural integration. Data were collected over two months through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis, allowing for triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of culturally grounded instructional practices. Thematic analysis of transcribed interviews and observation notes revealed that teachers act as cultural mediators, adapting curricula to integrate local traditions, storytelling, and communal problem-solving approaches, which enhance student engagement, comprehension, and collaboration. Community involvement was found to reinforce these strategies by providing authentic knowledge and fostering shared responsibility for learning. The findings also highlight the role of culturally relevant pedagogy in motivating students, improving classroom participation, and sustaining innovative instructional practices. The study concludes that culture is not a barrier but a critical resource for educational innovation in rural contexts, and it recommends professional development for teachers, structured mechanisms for community participation, and further research into the long-term impacts of culturally grounded learning strategies. These insights contribute to understanding how culture can be systematically leveraged to improve education in culturally diverse and resource-limited settings.

Keywords: *Learning, Culture, Strategy, Innovation, Ihosy.*

Introduction

Education systems in culturally diverse and economically constrained contexts increasingly face the challenge of designing learning strategies that resonate with local realities while remaining aligned with global standards of quality and equity (Bien-Aimé et al., 2025). In many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, schools operate within deeply rooted cultural systems that shape values, communication patterns, social hierarchies, and perceptions of knowledge (Bertella & Rinaldi, 2020). In Madagascar, these dynamics are particularly visible in rural and semi-rural regions such as Ihosy, where formal schooling intersects with strong communal traditions and indigenous knowledge systems (Emynorane et al., 2026). Prior study has demonstrated that when education is detached from local culture, learning becomes less

meaningful and student engagement declines (Zhang et al., 2023). At the same time, global scholarship increasingly recognizes culture as a critical driver of innovation, adaptability, and performance across organizational and educational settings (Amoa-Gyarteng & Dhliwayo, 2024). These perspectives suggest that culturally grounded learning strategies are not merely contextual adaptations but foundational mechanisms for educational transformation.

Ihosi, located in southern Madagascar, represents a region where socio-economic vulnerability, limited educational infrastructure, and strong communal traditions coexist. Regional disparities in educational achievement are closely associated with poverty, marginalization, and uneven access to learning resources (Daniele, 2021; Emynorane et al., 2025). Schools in such contexts often struggle to implement standardized pedagogical models that originate from urban or Western settings, creating a disconnect between learners' lived experiences and classroom instruction. Studies across rural settings show that culturally disconnected strategies contribute to low participation, weak motivation, and reduced learning outcomes (Jailani et al., 2025; Owan, 2019). In Ihosi, education unfolds within a social system where elders, community leaders, and collective norms strongly influence children's attitudes toward schooling, making culture a central axis for pedagogical innovation rather than a peripheral variable.

Emerging evidence highlights that community participation and culturally embedded practices significantly enhance school effectiveness and learner engagement. Community-school partnerships have been shown to strengthen accountability, improve learning environments, and increase students' sense of belonging (Edwards et al., 2020; Mashyaka & Ndayambaje, 2025; Tadle-Zaragosa & Sonsona, 2021). In Madagascar, community-wide initiatives supporting foundational literacy and numeracy have produced measurable improvements in primary education outcomes (Maruyama & Igei, 2024). Similar patterns have been observed in rural India and Southeast Asia, where culturally responsive approaches and community involvement foster sustainable learning ecosystems (Phuangsuwan et al., 2025; Dangi & Jamal, 2016). These findings reinforce the notion that learning strategies rooted in cultural contexts are more likely to generate long-term impact than externally imposed instructional models.

Culture also functions as a catalyst for innovation, shaping how organizations and institutions respond to changing environments. Study in management and social sciences demonstrates that organizational culture significantly influences innovation capacity, adaptability, and performance (Zhang et al., 2023). When applied to educational settings, this perspective suggests that schools operating within culturally coherent systems are better positioned to develop creative learning strategies that reflect community values and social norms. Studies of learning communities and co-creative practices further illustrate how collective knowledge production enhances problem-solving and pedagogical relevance (Bertella & Rinaldi, 2020; Chatkaewnapanon & Kelly, 2019; Canosa et al., 2020). In Ihosi, where oral traditions, communal labor, and local storytelling remain central, these cultural resources offer untapped potential for instructional innovation.

Anthropological perspectives on education emphasize that learning is a socially constructed process shaped by language, history, and cultural identity. Linguistic and cultural exchanges between Malagasy and other knowledge systems reveal how meaning-making processes are embedded in social structures (Augustin & Emynorane, 2025; Yamada, 2014; Kumar et al., 2024). Formal schooling that fails to recognize these dynamics risks marginalizing local knowledge and reinforcing cultural dissonance. Study on school climate, empathy, and moral engagement demonstrates that culturally responsive environments reduce conflict and foster positive social behaviors (Montero-Carretero et al., 2021; Farrell et al., 2001). These findings suggest that learning strategies grounded in cultural values not only enhance academic outcomes but also contribute to social cohesion and emotional well-being.

Despite growing recognition of culture's role in education, empirical studies examining how cultural foundations directly shape learning strategy innovation in rural Madagascar

remain limited. Existing study tends to focus on community involvement, governance, or infrastructural challenges rather than pedagogical transformation rooted in local traditions (Bianchi & de Man, 2021). Studies on community engagement frequently highlight participation outcomes but provide less insight into how cultural knowledge is translated into concrete classroom strategies (Mashyaka & Ndayambaje, 2025; Edwards et al., 2020). This gap indicates a need for in-depth case studies that document culturally driven instructional practices and examine their implications for learning innovation.

Additional limitations are evident in the dominance of quantitative or policy-oriented approaches that overlook the lived experiences of teachers, students, and community members. Although large-scale evaluations demonstrate the effectiveness of community-based interventions (Oktari et al., 2025), they rarely capture the cultural narratives and symbolic meanings that shape educational behavior. Anthropological case studies remain underrepresented in learning strategy research, particularly in southern Madagascar, where cultural diversity and social resilience offer unique insights into pedagogical adaptation (Maruyama & Igei, 2024). This absence limits the global discourse on culturally responsive learning strategies by underrepresenting voices from marginalized regions.

Structural challenges within Madagascar's education system further complicate the integration of innovative learning strategies. Higher education and teacher training institutions face systemic constraints related to resource scarcity, policy inconsistency, and limited professional development opportunities (Sadat et al., 2025; Daniele, 2021). These barriers reduce teachers' capacity to experiment with culturally grounded pedagogies and adapt curricula to local contexts. Study on organizational capacity and systemic support demonstrates that innovation requires not only individual initiative but also institutional structures that nurture reflective practice and collaboration (Domitrovich et al., 2025). In regions such as Ihosy, where institutional resources remain limited, culture becomes an essential foundation for sustaining innovation from within the community.

The present study addresses these gaps by exploring how culture functions as a foundation for learning strategy innovation in Ihosy, Madagascar. By adopting an anthropological case study approach, this study examines the ways local traditions, social relationships, and communal values inform teaching practices and classroom interactions. Prior studies have established the importance of cultural alignment, community participation, and organizational coherence in improving educational outcomes (Essuman, 2019). Building on this foundation, the current investigation seeks to contribute empirical evidence from a context that remains underrepresented in international scholarship. This focus provides a nuanced understanding of how culturally embedded strategies can foster meaningful, sustainable, and locally relevant educational innovation.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative case study methods to explore how local culture serves as a foundation for learning strategy innovation in Ihosy, Madagascar, a context characterized by strong communal traditions, limited educational resources, and close interaction between schools and the surrounding community. The study was conducted in three public secondary schools and one community learning center selected for their active engagement with local cultural practices. A total of 24 participants were purposively and snowball-selected, consisting of three school principals, eight teachers, six students, four parents or community elders, and three education officers, ensuring diverse perspectives on teaching, learning, and cultural integration. Data were collected over two months through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis, allowing for triangulation and in-depth understanding of culturally grounded instructional practices. All qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically to identify patterns and key themes related to cultural values, pedagogical strategies, and innovation processes. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation across sources, member checking, and ethical procedures

including informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms, providing a credible and context-sensitive account of learning strategy development in Ithosy.

Results and Discussion

Results

The findings reveal that culture is not treated as a supplementary element in teaching but functions as a structural foundation for learning strategy innovation in Ithosy. Teachers consistently integrated local values, oral traditions, communal practices, and social norms into their instructional methods, making lessons more meaningful and accessible to students. Classroom observations showed that teachers frequently used local proverbs, storytelling, and community examples to explain abstract concepts, which increased student participation and comprehension. Students reported that lessons felt “*closer to real life*” when examples reflected their daily experiences, particularly in agriculture, family responsibilities, and community cooperation. These practices created a learning environment where students felt culturally recognized and intellectually engaged.

A major theme that emerged from the data was the role of teachers as cultural mediators. Teachers adapted the national curriculum by translating concepts into culturally familiar narratives and collaborative activities. Group learning based on traditional communal labor systems was commonly observed, where students worked collectively to solve problems and support peers. One teacher explained that using community stories helped students “*understand faster because they already know the meaning from home.*” This approach transformed classrooms into interactive spaces where students felt comfortable expressing ideas and asking questions, which significantly reduced classroom silence and passive learning.

Community involvement also played a critical role in shaping learning strategies. Parents and elders regularly visited schools to share local knowledge, history, and moral lessons, which were then incorporated into classroom discussions. These interactions strengthened the relationship between schools and the community and reinforced the relevance of education to local life. Principals reported that when community members were included in learning activities, student attendance improved and behavioral issues decreased. Observations confirmed that students showed greater respect for teachers and peers during culturally grounded lessons, reflecting the influence of shared community values.

Students described feeling more motivated and confident when their culture was acknowledged in school. Many expressed pride in seeing their traditions reflected in lessons, which encouraged them to participate actively. They also reported that collaborative activities based on local practices made learning “*less stressful*” and more enjoyable. Teachers noted that students who previously struggled became more engaged when lessons were connected to their everyday realities.

Finally, the findings indicated that culturally based strategies promoted innovation by encouraging teachers to design flexible, context-sensitive learning approaches. Rather than relying solely on textbooks, teachers created locally relevant materials, role-play activities, and community-based projects. These innovations allowed learning to extend beyond the classroom and into the community, reinforcing the idea that education is a shared cultural responsibility. Overall, the data demonstrate that culture in Ithosy is not a barrier to educational progress but a powerful resource that enables creative, inclusive, and sustainable learning strategies.

Discussion

Culture as a Pedagogical Resource, Not a Constraint

The findings from Ithosy demonstrate that local culture serves as a critical pedagogical resource, enabling teachers to contextualize abstract concepts and make learning meaningful for students. Cultural elements such as oral traditions, local proverbs, communal labor

practices, and indigenous knowledge were actively incorporated into classroom instruction, helping students connect formal learning with their everyday experiences. This approach challenges the perception that culture is a barrier to education; instead, it highlights how educational strategies can leverage cultural familiarity to enhance comprehension and engagement. Bien-Aimé et al., (2025) emphasize that when teaching aligns with students' cultural realities, it fosters relevance, engagement, and long-term retention of knowledge, particularly in rural regions where formal education is often perceived as disconnected from community life.

Teachers in Ihosy acted as cultural mediators, translating curriculum content into forms that resonate with students' lived experiences. For example, lessons on mathematics or science frequently incorporated examples drawn from local agriculture, household management, and traditional problem-solving methods. This adaptive pedagogy illustrates the concept of culturally responsive teaching, where educators use students' cultural frames of reference as a bridge to understanding formal content (Amoa-Gyarteng & Dhliwayo, 2024; Augustin & Emynorane, 2025). By doing so, teachers not only improve comprehension but also encourage critical thinking and creativity, as students learn to analyze problems through both formal knowledge and culturally embedded perspectives. Such practices also reduce the alienation students might feel when confronted with abstract or decontextualized content.

Community participation reinforced the use of culture as a pedagogical resource, providing authentic knowledge and context for classroom learning. Elders and parents were often invited to share stories, historical events, or practical skills, which teachers then incorporated into lessons. This co-creation of knowledge validates students' cultural backgrounds and situates learning within a familiar social framework, enhancing both motivation and behavioral engagement (Maruyama & Igei, 2024; Tadle-Zaragosa & Sonsona, 2021). Observations from the study indicate that students were more attentive and interactive when lessons reflected shared cultural knowledge, suggesting that culturally anchored pedagogy strengthens both academic and social dimensions of learning.

Furthermore, integrating culture into pedagogy fosters innovation by encouraging teachers to develop context-sensitive strategies that extend learning beyond traditional textbooks and classrooms. Role-playing, collaborative problem-solving, and community-based projects allowed students to apply knowledge in culturally meaningful ways, bridging theory and practice. These findings resonate with research on organizational and educational innovation, which emphasizes that cultural context is a driver of creativity and adaptive learning (Beran et al., 2004; Bashir et al., 2021). In sum, the study demonstrates that culture in Ihosy is a valuable pedagogical asset rather than a limitation, providing a foundation for effective, inclusive, and sustainable learning strategies that align with students' identities, community values, and real-life experiences.

Teachers as Cultural Mediators and Learning Innovators

Teachers in Ihosy play a central role in bridging the gap between formal curriculum requirements and students' cultural realities. Observations revealed that educators consistently adapted lesson content to align with local traditions, language, and communal practices, transforming abstract concepts into contextually meaningful learning experiences. By acting as cultural mediators, teachers facilitated understanding and engagement, ensuring that students could relate classroom knowledge to their daily lives. This mediation goes beyond translation of content, encompassing the integration of moral lessons, social norms, and local problem-solving strategies into teaching practices (Bien-Aimé et al., 2025).

Innovation in teaching emerged naturally from this mediating role. Teachers frequently modified instructional methods to suit the unique learning environment of Ihosy, incorporating group activities modeled on traditional communal labor, storytelling sessions, and role-playing exercises. These strategies fostered collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking among students, allowing them to approach problems using both formal knowledge and culturally grounded perspectives (Amoa-Gyarteng & Dhliwayo, 2024). Such flexibility

demonstrates that teachers are not passive deliverers of curriculum but active agents of pedagogical innovation, capable of reshaping learning experiences to fit the socio-cultural context of their students.

The mediating role of teachers was further reinforced by ongoing interaction with community members. Parents, elders, and local leaders frequently contributed knowledge and resources that teachers incorporated into classroom activities, creating a co-constructed learning environment. These interactions enabled teachers to design lessons that resonated with community values while simultaneously meeting educational standards, strengthening both student engagement and school-community relationships (Edwards et al., 2020). Teachers reported that drawing upon community knowledge enhanced classroom participation, reduced behavioral challenges, and encouraged students to take ownership of their learning.

Importantly, the combination of cultural mediation and pedagogical innovation supported sustainable instructional practices. Teachers were observed developing locally relevant teaching materials, community-based projects, and experiential learning activities that extended learning beyond the classroom. This approach aligns with broader research on organizational and educational innovation, highlighting the role of context-aware strategies in fostering adaptability and continuous improvement (Bertella & Rinaldi, 2020). In essence, teachers in Ihosy function as both cultural interpreters and innovators, demonstrating that effective education in rural, culturally rich contexts requires the deliberate integration of local knowledge into learning strategies, thereby promoting both academic success and cultural continuity.

Community Participation as a Catalyst for Learning Strategy Innovation

Community involvement emerged as a central factor in the development and implementation of learning strategies in Ihosy. The study revealed that parents, elders, and local leaders actively engaged with schools by contributing cultural knowledge, practical skills, and moral guidance that were incorporated into classroom instruction. Their participation not only enriched the content of lessons but also reinforced the relevance of education to students' daily lives. Teachers highlighted that community input allowed lessons to reflect shared values and expectations, creating a sense of ownership among students and bridging the gap between school and community (Maruyama & Igei, 2024).

The collaborative engagement of the community also served as a mechanism for innovation in learning strategies. Observations showed that teachers frequently used knowledge shared by community members to design experiential activities, such as local craft projects, agricultural simulations, and culturally informed problem-solving exercises. These strategies encouraged students to apply classroom learning in practical and culturally meaningful ways, fostering creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking (Jailani et al., 2025). By positioning community knowledge as a resource for learning, schools in Ihosy were able to develop instructional practices that were contextually relevant and adaptable to students' experiences.

Community participation further contributed to improved student motivation and engagement. Interviews with students indicated that lessons incorporating cultural practices, local stories, or community examples made learning more interesting and relatable. Parents and elders observed that when their knowledge was acknowledged and integrated into classroom activities, children showed increased enthusiasm for attending school, greater attentiveness, and stronger adherence to classroom norms (Edwards et al., 2020). Principals also reported that sustained collaboration with community members led to reductions in absenteeism and disciplinary issues, suggesting that active participation fosters a supportive learning environment that reinforces both academic and social outcomes.

Finally, the study indicates that community engagement strengthens the sustainability of culturally grounded learning strategies. By involving local stakeholders in curriculum adaptation and lesson design, schools created a shared responsibility for education that

extended beyond formal classroom boundaries. This collaborative approach ensures that innovations in teaching are not isolated initiatives but are embedded within the social and cultural fabric of the community (Mashyaka & Ndayambaje, 2025). Consequently, learning strategies in Ihosy are continuously informed, validated, and enhanced by the community, demonstrating that participatory practices are essential catalysts for both educational innovation and the preservation of local knowledge.

Cultural Relevance and Student Engagement

The findings indicate that embedding cultural relevance into classroom instruction significantly enhances student engagement in Ihosy. Lessons that incorporated local traditions, daily life experiences, and community values were consistently reported by students as more understandable, relatable, and enjoyable. When teaching drew on familiar cultural narratives, such as proverbs, oral histories, and communal practices, students demonstrated greater attention and participation. Many students expressed pride in seeing their own cultural identities reflected in school activities, which fostered a sense of belonging and personal connection to learning. This supports the idea that cultural relevance functions as a motivational tool, encouraging students to invest effort in both understanding and applying knowledge.

Teachers observed that culturally anchored strategies also improved active participation and collaboration in the classroom. Group work designed to mirror traditional community labor systems, storytelling exercises, and role-playing activities encouraged students to engage with each other constructively and to take responsibility for collective outcomes. By connecting educational content with cultural practices, students developed both academic competencies and social skills, illustrating that engagement extends beyond mere attention to include collaboration, problem-solving, and self-efficacy. These observations align with research suggesting that culturally relevant pedagogy enhances students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in learning (Bien-Aimé et al., 2025; Emynorane et al., 2024).

The study also highlighted the role of community narratives in sustaining engagement. When elders and parents participated in classroom activities or shared stories, students became more attentive and motivated, recognizing the practical and social significance of their lessons. Students reported that lessons felt "real" and meaningful when they could directly connect school content to family practices, community events, or local history. Teachers noted that engagement increased particularly among students who had previously struggled, suggesting that culturally relevant instruction can reduce learning disparities by making content accessible and inclusive (Maruyama & Igei, 2024).

Finally, cultural relevance promoted sustained motivation and a positive learning climate. When students saw their culture acknowledged and valued, they developed intrinsic interest in learning and a sense of responsibility for their own progress. Teachers described that culturally relevant strategies led to more respectful interactions, higher attendance, and improved academic outcomes. By integrating local knowledge, values, and practices into teaching, schools in Ihosy were able to foster an environment where students were both intellectually and socially engaged. This underscores that cultural relevance is not merely an enrichment strategy but a core mechanism for enhancing student engagement and achieving meaningful learning outcomes (Edwards et al., 2020; Bertella & Rinaldi, 2020).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that culture serves as a foundational resource for learning strategy innovation in Ihosy, Madagascar, shaping teaching practices, student engagement, and community participation. The findings reveal that culturally grounded pedagogy, through the integration of local traditions, oral histories, communal practices, and community knowledge, enhances comprehension, motivation, and collaboration among students while enabling teachers to act as cultural mediators and innovators in adapting curricula to local

contexts. Community involvement strengthens this process by contributing authentic knowledge, reinforcing social norms, and fostering shared responsibility for education, resulting in higher attendance, improved behavior, and more meaningful learning experiences. These insights highlight the importance of recognizing culture as a driver of educational innovation and sustainability rather than a constraint. Based on these findings, schools and policymakers are encouraged to provide professional development programs that train teachers in culturally responsive pedagogy, establish structured mechanisms for active community engagement, and supply resources that support the creation of locally relevant instructional materials. Future research could expand this line of inquiry by examining the long-term impacts of culturally grounded learning strategies on student achievement and social development, conducting comparative studies across other rural districts in Madagascar, and exploring how digital tools can complement cultural pedagogies. By positioning culture as a central element in educational design, educators and communities can co-create learning environments that are contextually meaningful, academically effective, and sustainable for rural education in culturally diverse settings.

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