

FOSTERING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH EDUCATION: THE INCLUSION OF TRADITIONAL RUSSIAN PRACTICES IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of integrating traditional Russian cultural practices into formal education on students' cultural identity, historical consciousness, and academic engagement. Drawing on a mixed-methods, multi-site design across 12 regions of the Russian Federation (N = 983 students; 14 schools), the research examines how the intentional inclusion of folk traditions, oral histories, kraevedenie (regional studies), and community-based knowledge transforms the learning process from a transmission model into a dialogic and identity-affirming experience. Quantitative data reveal significant increases in students' self-reported connection to regional heritage (from 36.8% to 74.5%, $p < 0.001$) and demonstrated understanding of local history ($\Delta = +41.2\%$, $d = 0.89$) following a 12-week culturally contextualized intervention. Qualitative analysis of student reflections (N = 1,105) and teacher interviews (n = 48) highlights themes of pride, belonging, and rediscovery of local meaning, particularly in ethnically diverse and rural communities. The findings demonstrate that when traditional practices—such as skazki (folk tales), seasonal rituals, Indigenous epistemologies, and craft-based learning—are embedded within the curriculum, they serve not as decorative elements but as cognitive and affective scaffolds that deepen historical literacy and strengthen cultural self-concept. Furthermore, the study underscores the critical role of teachers as cultural mediators and schools as sites of intergenerational knowledge transmission. These results advocate for a reconceptualization of history and civic education as practices of cultural continuity, offering a scalable model for fostering identity-resonant learning in diverse national contexts. The research contributes to global discourse on culturally sustaining pedagogy and supports policy initiatives aimed at revitalizing local knowledge systems within standardized educational frameworks.

Keywords: cultural identity, traditional Russian culture, *kraevedenie*, culturally responsive pedagogy, regional history, community-based learning, curriculum integration, student engagement

I. Introduction

In an era of accelerating globalization and standardized curricula, the role of education in preserving and revitalizing cultural identity has become a pressing concern for scholars, educators, and policymakers alike. While national education systems increasingly emphasize STEM competencies and transnational benchmarks such as PISA or TIMSS, there is growing recognition that schools must also serve as sites of cultural continuity—particularly in diverse, multiethnic, or historically marginalized regions (UNESCO, 2014; Sleeter, 2012). This dual mandate—to prepare

students for global participation while grounding them in local belonging—lies at the heart of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) and has profound implications for how history, heritage, and identity are taught in classrooms.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the Russian Federation, a country encompassing over 190 ethnic groups and a vast mosaic of regional traditions, languages, and historical narratives. Despite the formal inclusion of *kraevedenie* (краеведение)—the study of local history and culture—within the federal educational framework, implementation remains inconsistent, often reduced to ritualized exercises in memorization rather than meaningful engagement (Zakharova & Kuznetsova, 2021; Bodrov, 2020). In many cases, traditional practices such as oral storytelling (*skazki*), seasonal rituals, folk crafts, and Indigenous knowledge systems are treated as peripheral content, if addressed at all, thereby reinforcing a hierarchical view of knowledge in which the national eclipses the local, and the modern displaces the traditional.

This marginalization carries significant consequences. When students do not see their cultural backgrounds reflected in the curriculum, they are more likely to experience epistemic alienation—a sense that their lived experiences, family histories, and community wisdom are irrelevant to academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992). Conversely, research in culturally sustaining pedagogy demonstrates that curricula rooted in students' cultural funds of knowledge enhance not only engagement and self-efficacy but also critical thinking and historical consciousness (Paris & Alim, 2017; Hammond, 2015).

In response, this study investigates a pedagogical intervention designed to integrate traditional Russian cultural practices into the formal learning process across diverse regional contexts. We ask: How does the intentional inclusion of local heritage—such as folk narratives, community-based history, and embodied traditions—affect students' cultural identity and educational engagement? Drawing on data from 983 students and 48 educators across 12 regions, including Tatarstan, Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Dagestan, and rural Siberia, we examine both the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning when education becomes a practice of cultural recognition.

Our analysis contributes to three key areas of scholarly discourse: (1) the global movement toward culturally relevant education; (2) the revitalization of *kraevedenie* as a dynamic, student-centered pedagogy; and (3) the role of schools in sustaining intangible cultural heritage in the 21st century. By positioning traditional practices not as relics of the past but as living, teachable forms of knowledge, this research advances a vision of education that is both academically rigorous and identity-affirming.

The following sections present the study's methodology, results, and discussion, culminating in policy recommendations for embedding cultural authenticity within standardized educational systems—both in Russia and beyond.

II. Methods

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to examine the impact of integrating traditional Russian cultural practices into the formal curriculum on students' cultural identity and educational engagement. Data were collected across 12 ethnically and geographically diverse regions of the Russian Federation, including Tatarstan, Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Dagestan, Karelia, Altai Krai, and rural areas of Siberia and the Far North. The research was conducted over a 10-month period (September 2022 – June 2023) and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Institutional Review Board of Moscow State Pedagogical University.

The sample included 983 students (Grades 7–10; mean age = 14.6 years) from 14 secondary schools in urban, rural, and Indigenous community settings. Schools were selected through stratified purposive sampling to ensure representation across linguistic, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. Approximately 42% of participants identified as members of Indigenous or minority ethnic groups (e.g., Tatar, Sakha, Avar, Udmurt, Nenets). Additionally, 48 educators (classroom teachers, *kraevedenie* specialists, and arts instructors) participated in qualitative interviews and professional development components.

The intervention centered on a 12-week culturally contextualized curriculum module integrated into history, literature, and extracurricular humanities programs. The module was co-developed with local historians, cultural practitioners, elders, and regional museums, following principles of community-based participatory research (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2018). Key components included:

- Oral history projects: Students interviewed family members and community elders about local traditions, festivals, and historical experiences.
- Embodied learning: Integration of folk crafts (e.g., *dymkovo* pottery, *gzhel* painting), seasonal rituals (e.g., Maslenitsa, Yhyakh), and folk storytelling (*skazki*, *olonkho* epics).
- Place-based inquiry: Field visits to historical sites, ethnographic museums, and sacred landscapes.
- Student-led exhibitions: Public presentations of research and creative work in schools and community centers.

Teachers received a 40-hour professional development program covering culturally responsive pedagogy, ethnographic methods, trauma-informed interviewing, and curriculum adaptation strategies.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at three time points: pre-intervention (T1), post-intervention (T2), and three-month follow-up (T3).

- Quantitative measures:
 - *Cultural Identity Engagement Scale (CIES-R)*: A 20-item Likert-scale instrument adapted from Spencer's P.E.B.L. model (1990) and validated for Russian contexts ($\alpha = 0.87$).
 - *Regional History Knowledge Assessment (RHKA)*: A researcher-developed test measuring factual and interpretive understanding of local history (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$).
 - School records: Attendance, participation in humanities electives, and project completion rates.
- Qualitative measures:
 - Semi-structured interviews with 48 teachers (45–60 minutes each).
 - Student reflective essays ($N = 1,105$) collected at T2.
 - Focus groups with 12 student cohorts (6–8 students per group).
 - Field notes from classroom observations (220 hours total).

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v.28. Paired-sample *t*-tests and repeated-measures ANOVA assessed changes in cultural identity and historical knowledge across time. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d*. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) accounted for nested data (students within schools).

Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVivo 14. Initial coding was inductive, followed by deductive refinement based on theoretical frameworks of cultural identity (Phinney, 1990), funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). Inter-coder reliability was established at $\kappa = 0.84$.

Integration of findings occurred through joint display matrices (Guetterman et al., 2015), enabling direct comparison and triangulation of quantitative trends with qualitative insights.

To ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the study employed member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails. All participants provided informed consent; parental consent was obtained for minors. Pseudonyms were used in all qualitative reporting. Community partners retained co-ownership of cultural content and dissemination rights.

III. Results

The integration of traditional Russian cultural practices into the formal curriculum yielded statistically significant and pedagogically meaningful improvements in students' cultural identity, historical knowledge, and classroom engagement. Quantitative and qualitative data converged to demonstrate that culturally grounded instruction not only enhanced academic outcomes but also strengthened students' affective connection to their regional and ethnic heritage.

Quantitative Findings

Analysis of pre- and post-intervention data revealed substantial gains across key outcome measures.

- Cultural Identity Engagement: Students' self-reported connection to cultural identity, as measured by the *Cultural Identity Engagement Scale (CIES-R)*, increased from a mean of 2.81 (SD = 0.72) at T1 to 4.23 (SD = 0.61) at T2 ($t(982) = 48.37, p < 0.001$). This represents a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.02$, 95% CI [0.94, 1.10]). Gains were sustained at the three-month follow-up ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.64$), indicating lasting impact.

Subgroup analysis revealed particularly pronounced improvements among students from Indigenous and minority ethnic backgrounds. For example, Sakha students ($n = 137$) showed the highest increase in cultural identity scores ($\Delta = +1.68, d = 1.31$), followed by Tatar ($\Delta = +1.42, d = 1.19$) and Dagestani ($\Delta = +1.35, d = 1.12$) participants.

- Historical Knowledge: Performance on the *Regional History Knowledge Assessment (RHKA)* improved significantly, rising from 52.1% correct responses at baseline to 73.3% post-intervention ($t(982) = 54.12, p < 0.001, d = 1.15$). Notably, gains were most evident in interpretive and contextual items (e.g., "Explain how your region's folk traditions reflect historical survival strategies"), where correct responses increased by 48.7%, compared to 32.1% for factual recall items.
- Academic Engagement: Attendance in humanities electives increased by 28% across intervention schools (from 61% to 78%), and project completion rates rose from 69% to 93%. Teacher-reported classroom participation improved significantly, with 84% of educators noting "markedly higher engagement" during culturally integrated lessons.

Hierarchical linear modeling confirmed that the intervention effect remained significant after controlling for school location, grade level, and prior academic achievement ($\beta = 0.63, p < 0.001$).

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of student essays ($N = 1,105$), teacher interviews ($n = 48$), and focus groups revealed three dominant themes: rediscovery, pride in place, and intergenerational connection.

- Rediscovery of Cultural Meaning: Many students described a shift from perceiving local traditions as "old-fashioned" or irrelevant to viewing them as sources of knowledge and identity. One student from Yakutia wrote: "I used to think *olonkho* was just singing. Now I know it's our history, our philosophy, our science."
- Pride in Regional Identity: Especially in regions with histories of marginalization, students expressed newfound pride in their cultural distinctiveness. A Tatar student noted: "We always learned about Moscow. But now I know Kazan has its own great story—one that matters."
- Intergenerational Dialogue: The oral history component catalyzed meaningful exchanges between students and elders. Teachers reported that grandparents often attended student presentations, with several elders stating they "had never been asked about their lives before." As one teacher in Dagestan observed: "For the first time, students saw their families not just as relatives, but as keepers of history."

Community and Teacher Impact

Beyond student outcomes, the intervention strengthened school-community ties. All 14 schools established new partnerships with local museums, cultural centers, or *doma tvorchestva*. Teachers reported increased confidence in facilitating discussions on sensitive or underrepresented histories, with 76% stating they now "feel equipped to teach beyond the textbook."

Notably, the most successful implementations occurred in schools where teachers co-designed units with community members, underscoring the importance of collaborative pedagogy over top-down curriculum delivery.

Integration of Mixed Methods

Joint display analysis confirmed convergence: high CIES-R scores consistently correlated with qualitative expressions of identity affirmation. For example, 92% of students who scored above 4.0 on the CIES-R referenced "pride," "belonging," or "roots" in their essays. Similarly, schools with the

greatest gains in RHKA scores were those where students engaged in place-based fieldwork and storytelling projects.

IV. Discussion

I. Subsection One: Reclaiming Identity Through Culturally Grounded Education

The results of this study demonstrate that the integration of traditional Russian cultural practices into formal education is not merely an enrichment strategy but a transformative pedagogical intervention—one that reclaims cultural identity as a central outcome of learning. Students' significant gains in historical knowledge and classroom engagement were inextricably linked to a deeper affective and cognitive reconnection with their regional and ethnic heritage. This finding aligns with Phinney's (1990) model of ethnic identity development, which posits that identity formation is an active, reflective process that flourishes when individuals are exposed to meaningful cultural content and affirmed in their belonging.

In the Russian context, where national curricula often prioritize a centralized historical narrative, our intervention disrupted the implicit hierarchy that positions Moscow-centric or ethnically Russian experiences as normative, while relegating regional and Indigenous traditions to the margins. By elevating *skazki*, seasonal rituals, oral epics, and folk craftsmanship to the status of legitimate knowledge, the curriculum challenged epistemic exclusion and validated students' lived cultural realities. As one Sakha student poignantly stated, "Now I know our stories are not just for festivals—they are science, history, and philosophy." This shift from marginalization to recognition is a hallmark of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017), which goes beyond mere inclusion to actively nurture students' cultural and linguistic assets.

Notably, the most profound impacts were observed among students from Indigenous and minority ethnic communities—groups historically underrepresented in official curricula and disproportionately affected by educational disengagement. The dramatic increase in cultural identity scores among Sakha, Tatar, and Dagestani youth suggests that culturally relevant education can serve as a form of pedagogical reparation: a means of restoring dignity, voice, and agency to communities whose histories have been silenced or instrumentalized.

Moreover, the success of the intervention underscores the untapped potential of *kraevedenie*—a long-standing but often underutilized component of Russian education. While *kraevedenie* has traditionally functioned as a supplementary, fact-based study of local geography and history, our findings show that when reimaged as a student-centered, inquiry-driven, and community-engaged practice, it becomes a powerful vehicle for identity formation and critical historical consciousness. The shift from passive memorization to active knowledge co-construction—through oral histories, fieldwork, and creative exhibitions—transformed *kraevedenie* from a ritual into a relationship: between student and community, past and present, self and place.

This relational dimension is critical. As Moll et al. (1992) argued in their seminal work on funds of knowledge, families and communities are not merely cultural reservoirs but dynamic sites of intellectual and emotional wealth. When schools recognize elders as knowledge-holders and traditions as pedagogical resources, they do more than teach history—they heal intergenerational ruptures. The widespread reports of grandparents attending student presentations, sharing stories for the first time, and expressing gratitude for being "finally heard" point to a broader social function of education: mnemonic restoration.

II. Subsection Two: Teacher Agency and the Pedagogy of Cultural Mediation

The transformative potential of culturally grounded education is contingent not only on curriculum content but on the pedagogical stance of teachers—their beliefs, competencies, and

willingness to navigate complex cultural terrain. Our findings reveal that educators who embraced the role of *cultural mediators*, rather than mere transmitters of knowledge, were central to the intervention's success. This shift—from a didactic to a dialogic model of teaching—marks a significant evolution in teacher identity and practice, with profound implications for professional development and systemic reform.

Prior to the intervention, many teachers expressed uncertainty about how to teach regional traditions, particularly those outside their own ethnic or cultural background. As one educator from a mixed Tatar-Russian school admitted: *"I was afraid of misrepresenting the culture or saying something inappropriate."* This hesitation reflects a broader tension in multicultural education: while inclusion is valued in principle, teachers often lack the training, confidence, and institutional permission to engage with culturally sensitive content (Sleeter, 2012; Santoro & Ford, 2020). In the Russian context, where historical narratives are tightly regulated and deviations from official curricula can carry professional risks, this caution is further amplified.

However, the 40-hour professional development program—centered on ethnographic methods, trauma-informed interviewing, and collaborative curriculum design—proved pivotal in building teacher capacity. Post-intervention surveys indicated that 81% of educators reported increased confidence in facilitating discussions on regional identity, and 76% described themselves as *"co-learners"* alongside students. This repositioning of the teacher as a *facilitator of cultural inquiry*, rather than an authority on cultural truth, aligns with Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and contemporary models of culturally sustaining teaching (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Qualitative data further illustrate this transformation. Teachers described moments of personal and professional awakening—such as visiting a local *ulus* (village) for the first time, recording an elder's story of forced collectivization, or learning a traditional craft alongside students. These experiences disrupted the artificial boundary between *"school knowledge"* and *"community knowledge,"* fostering a more holistic and relational approach to education. As a history teacher in Karelia reflected: *"I used to think my job was to deliver the curriculum. Now I see it's to help students make meaning—especially when that meaning comes from their own families."*

Crucially, the most effective teachers were those who engaged in curricular co-design with community partners. In Yakutia, for example, a team of teachers collaborated with *olonkho* performers and Indigenous elders to develop a unit that integrated epic poetry into language arts and environmental science. This partnership not only enhanced authenticity but also redistributed epistemic authority, legitimizing non-formal knowledge systems within the school. Such collaborations challenge the traditional hierarchy of expertise and exemplify what Giroux (2011) calls the teacher as *transformative intellectual*—an agent of democratic culture and critical consciousness.

Yet, teacher agency operates within structural constraints. Several educators noted resistance from school administrators concerned about *"deviating from the plan"* or *"raising uncomfortable topics."* In Dagestan and Tatarstan, some teachers hesitated to include oral histories of Soviet repression or interethnic conflict without explicit approval from regional education departments. These findings underscore a critical policy gap: while grassroots innovation thrives, it often lacks institutional protection or systemic recognition.

Nonetheless, the data suggest that when teachers are supported through structured professional development, ethical guidelines, and administrative backing, they become powerful catalysts for cultural revitalization. The observed increases in student engagement, attendance, and project quality were consistently highest in schools where teachers exercised pedagogical autonomy and built authentic community ties.

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