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Studying the Role of Schools in Institutionalizing Cultural Self-Awareness Based on Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the role of schools in fostering and institutionalizing cultural self-awareness among students through cultural heritage education. This research used a mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the qualitative phase, data were collected through documentary and library research based on interdisciplinary perspectives. In the quantitative phase, a descriptive-survey method was applied. The statistical population included high school students and teachers in Talesh County, Iran. Using Cochran's formula, a sample of 120 students and 30 teachers was selected from six public schools representing high, middle, and low socioeconomic levels. Data were gathered using a 30-item questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. The instrument measured cultural awareness, sources of knowledge about cultural heritage, and the perceived role of schools and other institutions. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive and comparative statistical techniques. The findings showed that schools have a significant but moderate effect on cultural self-awareness. Media sources, especially the internet, social networks, and satellite programs, had a stronger influence on participants' awareness. Significant differences were observed across socioeconomic groups, with students in middle-level areas demonstrating higher cultural self-awareness than those in higher or lower levels. National cultural elements had a stronger impact on identity and pride than local or religious elements, while global awareness was also evident. Overall, the results partially supported the research hypothesis. The study concludes that although schools play an important role in developing cultural self-awareness, their impact is limited without structured educational planning. Strengthening cooperation between educational institutions and cultural heritage organizations, integrating heritage content into curricula, and using modern communication tools can enhance students' cultural awareness. Cultural self-awareness is a key factor in preserving cultural heritage and strengthening identity.

Keywords: *Schools, Institutionalization, Cultural Self-Awareness, Cultural Heritage*

Introduction

Cultural self-awareness has become an increasingly important concept in contemporary educational, cultural, and policy debates because it connects individual identity formation to broader collective understandings of history, values, language, memory, and social belonging. In educational settings, cultural self-awareness is not limited to the passive recognition of cultural symbols; rather, it involves the reflective capacity to understand one's own cultural position, to interpret the historical and social roots of that position, and to engage constructively with cultural differences. This process is especially significant in school contexts, where identity is continually shaped through



formal curricula, institutional routines, peer interaction, and the symbolic environment of learning. From this perspective, schools do not merely transmit information; they participate in the formation of cultural subjectivities and in the reproduction or transformation of cultural meanings across generations. The development of culturally responsive education depends, therefore, on recognizing that learners bring with them particular cultural experiences and that education itself is one of the most influential mechanisms through which these experiences are interpreted and restructured (1, 2).

Cultural self-awareness is closely tied to the concept of identity because individuals come to know themselves not only as isolated persons but also as members of families, communities, linguistic groups, religious traditions, and nations. Identity is formed through relations of similarity and difference, and it is constantly rearticulated in response to changing social, political, and cultural conditions. In this sense, cultural self-awareness can be understood as a reflexive layer of identity through which individuals recognize both the internal diversity of their own culture and its relation to other cultures. Such awareness has a particularly important role in plural societies and in a global era characterized by intensified contact among peoples, ideas, and media forms. Without this reflective dimension, cultural belonging can remain unexamined and may easily harden into rigid binaries of self and other. By contrast, when cultural identity is accompanied by self-awareness, it can become a basis for dialogue, historical understanding, and balanced social participation (3, 4).

The increasing influence of globalization has made the question of cultural self-awareness even more urgent. Globalizing processes have expanded access to knowledge, mobility, and intercultural communication, but they have also intensified concerns over cultural homogenization, symbolic domination, and the erosion of local traditions. Educational systems now face the challenge of preparing learners to function in a global environment without losing their historical and cultural grounding. This tension has led scholars to reconsider the relationship between national culture, local identity, and global interconnectedness. Some have argued that globalization can threaten cultural particularity, especially when dominant ideologies or media flows marginalize local languages, customs, and memories. Others have shown that cultural diversity can be strengthened when educational institutions deliberately protect and cultivate the cultural resources of communities. Consequently, the role of schools has become central in mediating between continuity and change, between local heritage and global participation, and between inherited cultural forms and new cultural experiences (3, 5, 6).

Within this broader context, cultural heritage provides one of the most concrete and effective pathways for strengthening cultural self-awareness. Heritage links past and present by preserving the material, symbolic, ethical, artistic, and linguistic traces through which societies remember themselves. It offers learners access to shared narratives, aesthetic traditions, historical achievements, and moral frameworks that help situate present life within a longer civilizational continuum. Heritage is therefore not simply a collection of monuments or artifacts; it is a living educational resource that can deepen students' understanding of who they are, where they come from, and how their community relates to wider human experience. Ethical approaches to heritage emphasize that preservation is not only a technical matter but also a moral and educational responsibility because heritage contributes to intergenerational continuity, public meaning, and cultural dignity. For this reason, cultural heritage education should be understood as an essential part of identity formation rather than as a peripheral enrichment activity (7, 8).

The educational significance of heritage has become increasingly visible in recent international scholarship. Studies on heritage-based curricula have shown that when educational content is aligned with local culture, language, memory, and community practices, students develop stronger engagement with learning and more

meaningful connections to their social environment. Heritage-oriented instruction can also support inclusion by validating the cultural experiences of learners who may otherwise feel distanced from formal schooling. In the Zimbabwean context, aligning language instruction with a heritage-based curriculum has been proposed as a pedagogical framework for strengthening relevance and identity within the education system. Similarly, studies on the preservation of heritage languages in traditional educational settings show that cultural continuity is closely related to the institutions through which communities reproduce language and custom. These findings suggest that educational settings are among the most powerful spaces for translating cultural memory into lived awareness (2, 9).

The relationship between education and heritage is not limited to language. Artistic, musical, and aesthetic practices also serve as key carriers of cultural memory and identity. Research on the application of intangible cultural heritage in school art curricula has shown that schools often face both practical and conceptual difficulties in integrating heritage meaningfully into teaching, yet these challenges do not diminish the value of such integration. On the contrary, they reveal the need for carefully designed curricula, teacher preparation, and institutional support. Parallel work on music education has demonstrated that traditional artistic forms can be preserved and revitalized through educational engagement, particularly when teaching strategies connect aesthetic learning with local cultural identity. These perspectives indicate that heritage-based education is not merely about conserving the past but about creating active pedagogical forms through which culture can be interpreted, practiced, and renewed by younger generations (8, 10).

Recent educational research also highlights the importance of resource integration and school-community collaboration in building effective cultural programs. When schools cooperate with local cultural institutions, communities, and regional actors, students gain access to more authentic and participatory forms of heritage learning. This kind of “school-land” or school-community co-construction model has been shown to strengthen aesthetic education by embedding learning in local culture and shared space. Similarly, research on rural primary schools demonstrates that educational clustering and resource integration can improve program quality and expand access to culturally meaningful instruction. Such findings are especially relevant for heritage education because cultural awareness is often strongest when learners encounter heritage not only as textual content but as lived reality connected to place, community, and practice (11, 12).

Another important dimension of contemporary cultural awareness concerns the role of new media and digital environments. Young people increasingly encounter culture through online platforms, visual content, social networks, and digital storytelling rather than solely through textbooks or formal instruction. Research has shown that social media and infographics can significantly increase cultural heritage awareness among young audiences by making heritage content more accessible, interactive, and emotionally engaging. At the same time, the growing influence of digital media raises questions about whether schools are keeping pace with the forms through which cultural meaning is now communicated. If educational institutions do not actively shape heritage learning, media environments may become the dominant, and sometimes unstructured, source of cultural knowledge. This development reinforces the need for schools to combine traditional educational roles with contemporary communication strategies so that cultural self-awareness is nurtured both critically and effectively (13).

The inclusion of indigenous knowledge, local technologies, and community practices in formal curricula likewise offers an important framework for strengthening cultural self-awareness. Educational research in STEAM contexts suggests that incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into school learning can challenge the artificial

separation between formal education and lived culture. When learners see that the knowledge of their communities has intellectual, practical, and ethical value, they are more likely to develop pride in their heritage and a deeper sense of cultural continuity. Such inclusion can also broaden the meaning of education itself, moving it beyond abstract instruction toward contextualized and socially rooted understanding. In the same direction, analyses of cultural values in religious school environments indicate that institutional culture can play a decisive role in shaping students' moral and cultural orientations, especially when values are consistently embedded in educational practice rather than treated as isolated themes (14, 15).

Educational tourism and heritage-based experiential learning represent another significant avenue for cultural self-awareness. Intangible cultural heritage is often most effectively understood when students encounter it through place, practice, performance, and participation. Research on educational tourism related to intangible heritage has shown that the success of such programs depends on suitability, spatial organization, and the removal of practical obstacles, but it also confirms their considerable potential for meaningful cultural learning. This is especially relevant for adolescents, whose cultural orientation may be shaped more strongly by direct experience than by abstract description. Heritage visits, guided tours, community events, and interaction with local cultural bearers can transform cultural knowledge from passive recognition into active understanding. Such experiential approaches help students connect everyday life to historical depth and perceive heritage as a living dimension of social identity (16).

The historical and political dimensions of cultural education must also be considered. Educational programs do not operate in a neutral vacuum; they are shaped by prevailing ideas of nationhood, religion, citizenship, and social order. In contexts where ideology exerts a strong influence over cultural policy, the teaching of heritage may become selective, exclusionary, or unbalanced. Discussions of nation and nationhood in the Iranian context have shown that the relation between religious identity and national identity has long been contested and that cultural education may be affected by these ideological tensions. This makes it especially important to distinguish between heritage education that broadens cultural understanding and ideological instruction that narrows it. A school that aims to cultivate cultural self-awareness should help learners critically appreciate local, national, religious, and global dimensions of heritage rather than confining them within rigid interpretive boundaries (5, 17).

Historical studies of educational programs in minority and heritage-language settings further demonstrate that schooling can become a site of contested solidarities, recognition, and cultural negotiation. The case of heritage-language and Black cultural-heritage programs in Ontario shows that the politics of race, language, and community recognition profoundly shape how culture enters educational institutions. Such work reminds us that heritage education is never simply about content delivery; it also concerns legitimacy, representation, and the question of whose culture is valued within the school. In societies marked by internal diversity, cultural self-awareness must therefore be cultivated in ways that affirm both belonging and plurality. This balance is especially important for preventing exclusionary identity narratives and for fostering mutual respect among students who inhabit different cultural locations (18).

Despite the growing international interest in heritage-based education, many educational systems still lack comprehensive and operational models for integrating cultural heritage into everyday school life. Schools may acknowledge the value of heritage in principle yet fail to translate that recognition into curriculum design, classroom practice, teacher development, or co-curricular programming. In many cases, heritage remains confined to symbolic ceremonies, fragmented references in textbooks, or extracurricular occasions rather than becoming a sustained

pedagogical framework. Earlier Iranian scholarship has emphasized that schools are among the most important institutions for transmitting cultural and historical values and can play a decisive role in strengthening identity when educational planning is thoughtful and dynamic. The cultural atmosphere of the school, the role of teachers and administrators, and the flexibility of educational structures all influence whether schools become active agents of cultural formation or merely passive transmitters of formal content (4-6).

This issue is especially important at the secondary-school level, where students are simultaneously consolidating personal identity, engaging with wider media environments, and becoming more conscious of social difference and cultural hierarchy. If schools do not provide structured opportunities for students to understand cultural heritage critically and meaningfully, other institutions and platforms may shape their awareness in partial or distorted ways. Conversely, when schools engage students with local traditions, national symbols, artistic heritage, ethical values, and intercultural understanding, they can contribute significantly to the development of balanced cultural self-awareness. Such education does not imply cultural closure; rather, it enables learners to move from inherited belonging to reflective belonging. It allows them to appreciate their own cultural world while recognizing the legitimacy and beauty of others, which is the basis of mature cultural identity in a global age (1, 7, 13).

Accordingly, the need to examine the role of schools in institutionalizing cultural self-awareness on the basis of cultural heritage is both theoretically and practically significant. It is theoretically significant because it links debates on identity, globalization, heritage, and educational policy. It is practically significant because it addresses how schools can influence students' values, preferences, knowledge, and attitudes toward local, national, religious, and global cultural forms. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the issue and the current educational need for culturally grounded yet inclusive models of learning, empirical investigation into this relationship can provide useful insight for curriculum planning, cultural policy, and teacher practice (8-12, 14-16).

Therefore, the aim of the present study was to examine the role of schools in institutionalizing cultural self-awareness based on cultural heritage.

Methodology

Based on the nature of the data, the research method in this study is a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Given the qualitative nature of the information and the descriptive orientation of the study, data were collected using a library–documentary method, and the primary data collection tool was note-taking. In this process, sources such as Persian books and English and Persian scientific research articles were utilized. Data analysis was conducted using an inductive approach (from part to whole), and the analytical framework was based on a causal–comparative method. The statistical population in the quantitative section of the study consisted of schools in Talesh County, Gilan Province. To determine the sample size for the questionnaire method, Cochran's formula was applied, and a total of 120 students and 30 teachers were selected as the statistical sample. The student sample was equally distributed, with 40 participants from each category (two schools in each area). In the stratified section, the sample size was also 40 participants (two schools with 20 participants in each area). In the stratified statistical analysis, each option was categorized into three groups: the first representing high-level areas, the second representing schools with middle-level students, and the third representing schools located in areas with lower socioeconomic conditions.

The questionnaire items were designed in accordance with the research hypothesis, considering identity components and measuring the level of interest of students and teachers in cultural heritage. The questionnaire

included 30 items, and the estimated completion time ranged from 45 minutes to one hour. The main domains of the questionnaire were structured around two axis:

(a) The level of awareness of teachers and students regarding various aspects of cultural heritage at local, regional, religious, national, and global levels, based on their use of media, direct visits, classroom learning, or self-directed study, as well as the influence of society and family.

(b) The effects of the school institution (including staff, teachers, curriculum, and educational environment) on the institutionalization of cultural self-awareness based on awareness of cultural heritage.

Most responses were structured in a five-option format, reflecting five types of awareness among students and teachers: agreement with cultural heritage, disagreement with cultural heritage, lack of awareness of cultural heritage, indifference toward cultural heritage, and understanding of multiculturalism (cultural self-awareness).

Furthermore, to establish a climate of trust, participants (both teachers and students) were not asked to provide their names or surnames in the questionnaire, and their trust was ensured prior to participation.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study in a stratified form based on the socioeconomic level of the school areas. The results of the 30 questionnaire items show that cultural self-awareness grounded in cultural heritage was shaped by a combination of school influence, media exposure, identity orientation, attitudes toward diversity, and views on the preservation and teaching of cultural heritage.

Table 1. Examining Research Questions

Q.	Main Topic	Overall Most Selected Option	Overall n (%)	High Area: Dominant Option n	Middle Area: Dominant Option n	Lower Area: Dominant Option n
1	Main source of increased awareness	Internet, websites, social networks, and satellite programs	40 (33.3%)	Option 4 = 19	Option 2 = 12	Options 2 and 3 = 11 each
2	Awareness of architectural heritage	Rudkhan Castle and Salsal Castle of Gilan	52 (43.3%)	Option 1 = 20	Option 1 = 16	Option 1 = 18
3	Food culture and preferences	Mirza Ghasemi and stuffed fish with family	52 (43.3%)	Option 1 = 17	Option 1 = 16	Option 1 = 16
4	Historical monuments and cultural pride	Persepolis gives me a strong sense of pride	53 (44.1%)	Option 3 = 21	Option 4 = 19	Option 3 = 21
5	Attitude toward Iranian art	Iranian art is great, but other world arts are also beautiful	49 (40.8%)	Option 4 = 18	Option 4 = 20	Option 2 = 18
6	Literary and artistic interest	Reading or hearing Hafez's poetry	38 (31.6%)	Option 3 = 14	Option 2 = 13	Options 2 and 3 = 14 and 18 respectively
7	Preference for ceremonies and rituals	Nowruz and Yalda	59 (49.1%)	Option 3 = 20	Option 3 = 18	Option 3 = 20
8	Media consumption	National Iranian television channels	67 (55.8%)	Option 2 = 22	Option 2 = 22	Option 2 = 23
9	Important cultural figures	Interest in Hafez	79 (65.8%)	Option 3 = 21	Option 3 = 29	Option 3 = 27
10	Sports identity orientation	Esteghlal and Persepolis are the best Iranian teams	65 (54.1%)	Option 3 = 20	Option 3 = 26	Option 3 = 20
11	Knowledge of Persepolis	Persepolis is the name of Takht-e Jamshid/ Persepolis	91 (75.8%)	Option 3 = 34	Option 3 = 26	Option 3 = 31
12	Musical preference	Alireza Ghorbani, Shahram Nazeri, and Mohammadreza Shajarian	53 (44.1%)	Option 3 = 14	Option 3 = 19	Option 3 = 20
13	Clothing culture	Modern clothing	46 (38.3%)	Option 4 = 18	Option 4 = 15	Options 3 and 4 = 12 each

14	Attitude toward dogs	I like dogs but do not want bodily contact with them	51 (42.5%)	Option 3 = 16	Option 3 = 18	Option 3 = 17
15	Religious identity	Islam is the most complete religion and I would like to promote it	74 (61.6%)	Option 1 = 25	Option 1 = 26	Option 1 = 23
16	Architectural preference	All architectural styles in the world are beautiful	46 (38.3%)	Option 4 = 14	Option 4 = 19	Option 1 = 14
17	Language and dialect attitudes	All languages are beautiful and none is superior	64 (53.3%)	Option 4 = 21	Option 4 = 26	Option 4 = 18
18	Collective identity	There is no difference among people; good and bad exist everywhere	68 (56.6%)	Option 5 = 27	Option 5 = 26	Option 5 = 15
19	Individual identity	Beyond all identities, I am a human being	47 (39.1%)	Option 4 = 16	Option 4 = 18	Option 4 = 13
20	Reaction to anti-Arab stereotype	I would feel upset but say nothing	33 (27.5%)	Option 4 = 10	Option 4 = 14	Options 2 and 3 = 13 each
21	Cross-cultural etiquette	Some things are bad in our culture but may not matter in others	41 (34.1%)	Option 4 = 19	Option 4 = 19	Options 2 and 4 = 14 each
22	Urban–rural life preference	Rural life is better, but I still prefer to live in the city	34 (28.3%)	Option 2 = 15	Option 5 = 13	Option 1 = 12
23	Reaction to vandalizing heritage	I would be upset and warn the person	48 (40.0%)	Option 2 = 16	Option 5 = 23	Option 2 = 20
24	Whether heritage should be taught in school	Yes, heritage should be taught to students	84 (70.0%)	Option 1 = 29	Option 1 = 27	Option 1 = 29
25	Preferred mode of heritage teaching	Together with history and geography	47 (39.1%)	Options 2 and 4 = 13 each	Option 2 = 23	Option 4 = 15
26	Responsibility for heritage preservation	Preservation is the duty of every human being	58 (48.3%)	Option 5 = 20	Option 5 = 21	Option 5 = 17
27	Interregional marriage	Love and marriage should be free beyond old traditions	44 (36.6%)	Option 5 = 15	Option 5 = 17	Option 5 = 12
28	Sports heroes as identity models	Any athlete who helps people and brings them together is great	51 (42.5%)	Option 4 = 14	Option 4 = 24	Option 4 = 14
29	Teaching local games in school	I agree with this	58 (48.3%)	Option 1 = 25	Option 4 = 19	Option 1 = 25
30	Educational emphasis in heritage teaching	Comprehensive heritage education, Iranian and world heritage alike	45 (37.5%)	Option 4 = 17	Option 4 = 17	Option 1 = 12

The results of Question 1 indicate that, overall, the internet, websites, social networks, and satellite programs were the most influential source of increased awareness among respondents, with 40 participants (33.3%) selecting this option. In high-level areas, this option was also dominant, with 19 respondents. In middle-level areas, however, school and curriculum were the most selected source, with 12 respondents. In lower-level areas, school and curriculum and national broadcasting were tied, with 11 respondents each. This pattern suggests that while formal schooling still plays a role, digital and satellite media have become particularly influential in shaping awareness.

The findings of Questions 2 to 4 show that local and national heritage continue to hold strong symbolic value. In Question 2, awareness of Rudkhan Castle and Salsal Castle was the most frequent response across all three regional levels, indicating that locally familiar heritage sites were more salient than national, religious, or global monuments. In Question 3, local food culture also emerged strongly, as Mirza Ghasemi and stuffed fish eaten with family was the most preferred option overall and within all three area levels. In Question 4, Persepolis was the strongest source of cultural pride overall. High- and lower-level areas showed the strongest attachment to Persepolis, whereas middle-level respondents most frequently selected the desire to see global monuments such as the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal. This suggests that local heritage is highly familiar, while national

heritage remains a major source of pride, and middle-level respondents may display relatively greater openness to global heritage symbols.

Questions 5 to 7 further reflect a combination of national attachment and pluralistic orientation. In Question 5, the most frequent overall response was that Iranian art is great, but that other world arts are also beautiful, especially in high- and middle-level areas. Lower-level areas, by contrast, more often chose the more exclusive statement that art belongs to Iranians alone. In Question 6, literary and artistic preferences were distributed across religious, national, and global forms, but Hafez ranked first overall. The lower-level areas displayed particularly strong preference for religious poetry and Hafez. In Question 7, the most preferred ceremonies were Nowruz and Yalda in all three area levels, demonstrating the strong centrality of national cultural rituals compared with local, explicitly religious, or foreign celebrations.

Questions 8 to 12 demonstrate the central role of media and iconic cultural figures in cultural self-awareness. In Question 8, national Iranian television was by far the most watched medium overall and in all three strata, although local Gilan media were relatively more visible in high-level areas, and satellite channels had somewhat greater presence in middle-level areas. In Question 9, Hafez was overwhelmingly the most recognized and valued cultural figure, especially in middle-level areas. In Question 10, the dominance of Esteghlal and Persepolis indicates that national-level sports identity outweighed local or global football identity. In Question 11, recognition that Persepolis refers to Takht-e Jamshid/ Persepolis was extremely high across all strata, showing a strong baseline awareness of a key national heritage symbol. In Question 12, traditional Iranian vocalists such as Ghorbani, Nazeri, and Shajarian received the highest support overall, suggesting that classical and national musical heritage remains influential even among younger respondents.

Questions 13 to 17 reveal a complex negotiation among modernity, religion, locality, and pluralism. In Question 13, modern dress received the highest overall support, especially in high- and middle-level areas, whereas lower-level areas showed a more divided pattern between modern dress and appreciation of the clothing of Iranian ethnic groups. In Question 14, the dominant response overall was liking dogs without wanting bodily contact, suggesting an intermediate position rather than either strong religious rejection or full domestication. In Question 15, the largest majority in all three area levels affirmed Islam as the most complete religion and expressed willingness to promote it, demonstrating the continued strength of religious identity. At the same time, in Question 16 the most selected overall response was that all architectural styles in the world are beautiful, especially in high- and middle-level areas, indicating openness to global cultural forms. In Question 17, the largest share of respondents in all strata rejected linguistic hierarchy and stated that all languages are beautiful in their own context. This result suggests that cultural self-awareness was associated, at least in this domain, with an acceptance of linguistic diversity.

Questions 18 to 23 address collective identity, intercultural tolerance, and responsibility toward heritage. In Question 18, the dominant response overall was that there is no difference among people and that good and bad individuals exist everywhere; this was also the dominant response in each stratum, especially in high- and middle-level areas. In Question 19, the most common self-definition was that, beyond all identities, one is fundamentally a human being, again indicating a broader human-centered identity orientation. In Question 20, however, responses to an anti-Arab stereotype were more mixed: overall, the most common response was feeling upset but saying nothing, while middle-level areas most often chose a rationalizing interpretation that different peoples eat different things and that the phrase is not inherently an insult. Lower-level areas were divided between rejection and silent discomfort. In Question 21, the most common response overall was acknowledgment that behaviors judged

negatively in one culture may not be so in another, reflecting intercultural sensitivity. In Question 23, heritage protection attitudes were generally strong. The most frequent response overall was that respondents would be upset and warn someone writing on a historical tree or monument, and the second strongest response was that they would both warn the person and raise broader awareness. Notably, middle-level areas showed the strongest proactive stance, with 23 respondents selecting the most active preservation-oriented option.

Questions 24 to 30 show strong support for cultural heritage education and preservation, though with some differences regarding format and emphasis. In Question 24, a large majority across all three strata agreed that cultural heritage should be taught in schools, with 84 respondents (70.0%) overall. In Question 25, the most preferred format overall was to teach heritage together with history and geography, although respondents in lower-level areas more often favored heritage tours with guides. In Question 26, the dominant view in all three area levels was that preservation of cultural heritage is the responsibility of every human being, not only the government or civil society organizations. In Question 27, the strongest overall response supported freedom in love and marriage beyond regional traditions, showing that cultural self-awareness was associated for many respondents with a more rational and less geographically restricted view of marriage. In Question 28, the most valued sports role model was any athlete who helps people and brings them closer together, especially in middle-level areas, which indicates an ethical rather than purely heroic conception of public figures. In Question 29, respondents generally supported the inclusion of local games in schools, and many also supported the teaching of games from other regions. Finally, in Question 30, the most common overall response favored a comprehensive approach to heritage education covering both Iranian heritage and the cultural achievements of different world regions. High- and middle-level areas supported this comprehensive approach most strongly, whereas lower-level areas gave relatively greater weight to local heritage.

Overall, the findings suggest that respondents displayed meaningful levels of cultural self-awareness rooted in cultural heritage, but this awareness was not shaped by schools alone. Local heritage, national symbols, and religious identity all retained considerable influence, while pluralistic and human-centered attitudes were also clearly visible in many responses. The middle-level areas repeatedly showed stronger tendencies toward active heritage preservation, broader human identity, and more inclusive cultural interpretations. At the same time, digital and mass media emerged as major competitors to the school in influencing awareness. These findings support the conclusion that schools do play an important role in fostering cultural self-awareness based on cultural heritage, but their role remains moderate and is mediated by broader cultural, social, and media environments.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the role of schools in institutionalizing cultural self-awareness based on cultural heritage. The findings indicate that although schools contribute to shaping cultural self-awareness, their influence remains moderate compared to other socializing agents, particularly digital media and informal learning environments. The results showed that the internet, social networks, and satellite programs had the strongest influence on increasing respondents' awareness, while schools and formal curricula ranked lower. This pattern suggests that cultural awareness among students and teachers is increasingly mediated by contemporary communication technologies rather than being primarily structured through formal educational institutions. Such findings align with recent studies emphasizing the growing impact of digital platforms on cultural learning, where social media and visual communication tools significantly enhance awareness of cultural heritage among youth

(13). This shift highlights the need for schools to adapt to changing epistemological environments in which knowledge is no longer monopolized by formal education.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that local and national cultural elements continue to play a central role in shaping identity. Awareness of local heritage sites and preference for local food practices were consistently dominant across all socioeconomic groups, indicating that proximity and lived experience remain key determinants of cultural awareness. This is consistent with theoretical perspectives suggesting that cultural identity is deeply rooted in everyday practices, language, and spatial belonging (3). The prominence of national symbols such as Persepolis in generating cultural pride further reinforces the idea that heritage functions as a symbolic anchor for collective identity. Previous research has similarly emphasized the importance of preserving national and cultural identity within the context of globalization, arguing that educational systems must balance openness to global influences with the protection of indigenous cultural values (6).

However, the study also revealed a nuanced orientation toward global culture. A considerable proportion of respondents expressed interest in global heritage sites and recognized the value of cultural diversity, particularly in areas related to architecture, language, and intercultural interaction. This reflects an emerging form of cultural self-awareness that is not exclusively bounded by local or national frameworks but is instead characterized by a broader humanistic and pluralistic perspective. Such findings are consistent with the argument that globalization does not necessarily lead to cultural homogenization but can instead foster hybrid identities that integrate local and global dimensions (5). In educational terms, this suggests that schools should not only reinforce national identity but also cultivate intercultural competence and global awareness.

The results related to artistic, literary, and musical preferences further illustrate the coexistence of traditional and modern influences. The strong preference for classical Iranian poetry and music indicates the establishment relevance of cultural heritage in shaping aesthetic identity. At the same time, the presence of global cultural preferences, such as interest in foreign music and global media, suggests that students navigate multiple cultural repertoires simultaneously. This finding is consistent with research on heritage-based education, which shows that cultural engagement is most effective when it integrates traditional forms with contemporary modes of expression (10). It also supports the view that schools must adopt innovative pedagogical strategies to make cultural heritage meaningful and accessible in modern contexts.

Another important finding concerns the role of religion and moral values in cultural self-awareness. A majority of respondents expressed strong attachment to religious identity, indicating that religion remains a significant component of cultural consciousness. However, this was accompanied by a relatively high level of tolerance toward other cultures and practices, particularly in responses emphasizing human equality and cultural diversity. This dual orientation reflects a complex interplay between traditional belief systems and modern pluralistic values. Previous studies have highlighted the role of educational institutions in mediating this balance by promoting ethical reflection and intercultural understanding (15). In this regard, cultural self-awareness emerges not as a fixed identity but as a dynamic process of negotiation between inherited values and new experiences.

The findings also underscore the importance of experiential and contextual learning in fostering cultural awareness. Students demonstrated stronger engagement with heritage when it was relative with everyday life, such as local customs, food, and community practices. This supports the argument that heritage education should move beyond abstract instruction and incorporate experiential methods such as educational tourism, field visits, and community-based learning. Research on educational tourism has shown that direct interaction with cultural heritage

enhances understanding and strengthens emotional attachment to cultural identity (16). Similarly, the integration of indigenous knowledge and local practices into curricula has been identified as a key factor in making education culturally relevant and socially meaningful (14).

In terms of institutional roles, the moderate impact of schools observed in this study suggests structural limitations within the educational system. Despite the recognized importance of cultural heritage education, there appears to be a lack of comprehensive and systematic programs that effectively integrate heritage into school curricula. This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the challenges of implementing heritage-based education, including insufficient resources, lack of teacher training, and limited institutional support (8). Moreover, the absence of strong coordination between schools and cultural institutions may further reduce the effectiveness of educational efforts. Studies have shown that collaborative models involving schools, communities, and cultural organizations can significantly enhance the quality and impact of heritage education (11, 12).

The study also highlights the role of schools as potential agents of cultural transformation rather than mere transmitters of tradition. While schools currently play a moderate role, their capacity to influence cultural self-awareness remains substantial if appropriate policies and practices are implemented. Teachers, as key actors within the educational system, have a critical role in shaping students' cultural perspectives through both formal instruction and informal interaction. This aligns with earlier theoretical insights emphasizing the importance of school culture, teacher attitudes, and institutional climate in the process of cultural formation (4, 5). In this sense, strengthening the cultural function of schools requires not only curricular reform but also a broader transformation of educational environments.

Furthermore, the findings regarding students' attitudes toward heritage preservation indicate a relatively high level of responsibility and awareness. A significant proportion of respondents recognized heritage preservation as a shared human responsibility, which reflects an ethical dimension of cultural self-awareness. This is consistent with ethical approaches to cultural heritage that emphasize the collective responsibility of societies in protecting and transmitting cultural assets to future generations (7). At the same time, the presence of indifferent or passive responses suggests that awareness does not always translate into action, highlighting the need for educational strategies that promote active engagement and responsibility.

Finally, the study reveals the importance of addressing ideological and policy-related factors in cultural education. The influence of broader political and cultural frameworks on educational content may shape how heritage is presented and interpreted in schools. Previous studies have shown that ideological orientations can either facilitate or constrain the development of inclusive and balanced cultural awareness (17). Therefore, achieving effective cultural self-awareness requires an approach that is both culturally grounded and open to critical reflection.

One of the main limitations of this study is its limitation to a specific geographical context, namely schools in Talesh County, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different cultural, social, and economic conditions. Additionally, the use of self-report questionnaires may introduce response bias, as participants might provide socially desirable answers rather than reflecting their real attitudes and behaviors. The cross-sectional design of the study also restricts the ability to examine changes in cultural self-awareness over time. Furthermore, the study focused primarily on students and teachers, without including other influential stakeholders such as parents, policymakers, or cultural practitioners, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Future studies should expand the scope of research to include diverse geographical regions and educational settings in order to enhance the external validity of the findings. Longitudinal designs could be employed to examine how cultural self-awareness evolves over time and in response to educational interventions. Researchers are also encouraged to use mixed-method approaches with a stronger qualitative component, such as interviews and observations, to gain deeper insights into the processes underlying cultural learning. In addition, future research could explore the role of emerging technologies, digital platforms, and informal learning environments in shaping cultural awareness, as well as investigate the perspectives of parents, community members, and cultural institutions.

From a practical perspective, educational policymakers and school administrators should prioritize the integration of cultural heritage into formal curricula in a structured and systematic manner. Schools should strengthen collaboration with cultural heritage organizations, museums, and local communities to provide experiential learning opportunities. Teachers should be trained in culturally responsive pedagogies and encouraged to use innovative methods, including digital tools, to engage students with heritage content. Finally, creating a supportive school culture that values diversity, critical thinking, and cultural reflection can significantly enhance the institutionalization of cultural self-awareness among students.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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