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Cultural Friction and the Shaping of Well-Being Curriculum in International Schools: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

This study examines how students experience cultural relevance and cultural friction in well-being education, and how teachers adapt their practice, within a culturally diverse international school. Although international schools bring together students from many national, cultural, and family backgrounds, the well-being curricula they deliver are largely shaped by Western educational assumptions that may not align with all students' values and lived experiences. Adopting a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, the study was conducted at Britannia International School (BIS), a British-curriculum A-Level school in China. Data were collected through a short Likert-scale questionnaire completed by seven Year 12 students and a semi-structured interview with the school's well-being teacher. Questionnaire responses were summarised using descriptive statistics, and the interview was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students perceived the well-being content as moderately but unevenly culturally relevant, with comfort during sensitive discussion varying widely across the class. Cultural friction was situational rather than constant, emerging most clearly around sensitive topics such as mental health, identity, family roles, and trauma, and was shaped by differing cultural norms regarding emotional expression and privacy. Teacher adaptation focused less on changing the formal curriculum than on managing discussion, setting non-judgemental rules, and creating emotional safety. The study concludes that cultural diversity does not automatically make well-being teaching culturally balanced: cultural relevance must be actively built, friction identified, and teacher adaptation supported through practical training. These context-specific findings offer implications for teachers, school leaders, and curriculum designers.

Keywords: Cultural Friction, Cultural Relevance, Well-Being Education, International Schools, Teacher Adaptation, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Introduction

Overview

Student well-being has moved to the centre of contemporary schooling, and international schools increasingly deliver formal well-being and social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes intended to support every learner (Tan, 2025; Jagers et al., 2019). Whether such programmes are experienced as equally meaningful by culturally diverse students cannot, however, be assumed; when they are not, schools risk producing the very disengagement, discomfort, and exclusion that well-being education is meant to prevent. Understanding how well-being learning is experienced across cultures is therefore not only an academic question but a practical priority for the schools, teachers, and students who rely on these programmes, and it is this need that the present study addresses. Globalisation has made the student populations of international schools increasingly diverse. Learners who move to a new country, whether with their parents or independently, regularly encounter peers from very different cultural backgrounds and must come to terms with unfamiliar life experiences, family expectations, and cultural values. Learning together in such an environment is not always straightforward. This is especially evident in international schools that deliver mainstream curricula such as the IB, A-Level, or AP, which are largely shaped by Western educational philosophies. In these settings, students must adapt not only to culturally diverse peers but also to curriculum content, learning approaches, and value assumptions that differ from those of their home cultures.

When curriculum content does not match students' lived experiences, the result can be cultural friction in the classroom. Students interpret psychological and well-being concepts through their own cultural traditions, which can lead to misunderstanding, discomfort, or disengagement. For example, the emphasis on individualism and personal autonomy that is common in Western well-being teaching does not always align with the values of students from more collectivist backgrounds. These differences become especially visible when sensitive issues such as mental health, identity, and family roles are discussed, as these are understood and expressed differently across cultural contexts (Ferrero, 2024). This points to the need to examine how well-being learning is experienced by students and adapted by teachers in culturally diverse international school classrooms.

Background to the Study

International schools, and particularly those in China, bring together students from many national, cultural, religious, linguistic, and social backgrounds. Students must adapt both to diverse peers and to international curricula influenced by Western educational and psychological perspectives. This makes classroom learning culturally complex, because students arrive with different family expectations, cultural values, religious practices, and prior educational experiences. Muslim students observing Ramadan, for instance, may experience classroom participation differently during the fasting period, especially when peers and teachers do not fully understand how religious practice shapes routines, energy levels, or a sense of belonging. Cultural diversity is therefore not only a matter of nationality and language; it concerns how students experience everyday school life and classroom learning.

This issue is particularly important in well-being education, because well-being lessons address topics closely connected to students' cultural values and personal experiences,

including mental health, emotional expression, help-seeking, identity, family expectations, peer relationships, and coping with difficulty. Students interpret these topics through different cultural assumptions. Those from some East Asian backgrounds tend to manage difficulty more privately and may avoid expressing distress directly, while students from some Western backgrounds are more accustomed to discussing problems openly and seeking support. Neither approach is better than the other; rather, students' understanding of well-being concepts is shaped by cultural and family contexts. When these differences are not recognised, well-being lessons can produce misunderstanding, discomfort, or a sense of distance from the content. In this study, such moments are understood as cultural friction.
Teachers therefore play an important role in helping students make sense of well-being content in culturally diverse classrooms. Their practices are not fixed or universal but are shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they work (Hempkin, 2023). Teachers need to do more than deliver content: they must adapt examples, discussion methods, expectations, and communication styles so that well-being learning becomes culturally relevant and accessible. This matters because well-being education is not culturally neutral; the way students understand emotions, identity, family roles, and help-seeking varies with their cultural and family contexts, and teacher adaptation is central to reducing misunderstanding and supporting meaningful learning.

Although previous studies have examined multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching, much of this research focuses on general classroom practice or on subjects such as science and language learning (Kalogiannakis et al., 2021). Comparatively little attention has been given to how well-being education in international schools responds to cultural diversity, especially regarding students' experiences of cultural relevance and friction and how teachers adapt content and discussion when students bring different cultural assumptions into the classroom. This study addresses that gap.

Problem Statement

International schools often aim to develop students' international mindedness, cultural diversity, and intercultural understanding. However, bringing together students from different backgrounds does not automatically produce mutual understanding, and diversity can also create tension in discussion and peer interaction. When current affairs, political events, national identity, or cultural practices are discussed, students may direct negative emotions toward classmates of particular backgrounds. Similarly, when students feel their own culture or national identity is being criticised, they may respond defensively or express culturally insensitive views. Such situations can lead to misunderstanding, peer conflict, social exclusion, or even cultural discrimination.

This is particularly relevant to well-being education, which is expected to support emotional awareness, respectful communication, social development, identity formation, and conflict management. Yet well-being content is not culturally neutral. Topics such as mental health, emotional expression, help-seeking, trauma, identity, family roles, and peer relationships are closely tied to students' cultural values and lived experiences (Ferrero, 2024). When such topics are taught through culturally unfamiliar examples or assumptions, some students find the content difficult to understand, feel uncomfortable during discussion, or become less willing to participate. Well-being education can thus become uneven in relevance and

accessibility if teachers simply deliver content rather than adapting it to students' cultural backgrounds.

The problem, then, is not simply that international schools are culturally diverse, but that students' lived experiences of cultural difference in well-being classrooms remain insufficiently understood. While prior work has addressed multicultural education, culturally responsive teaching, and teachers' intercultural sensitivity in broad terms, less attention has been paid to how students experience cultural relevance and friction specifically in international school well-being classrooms, and to how teachers adapt content, examples, and discussion when students bring different cultural assumptions and emotional responses into the room (Hempkin, 2023).

Research Objectives

RO1. To explore students' perceptions of the cultural relevance of well-being-related content in an international school.
RO2. To examine the forms of cultural friction students experience when engaging with well-being-related learning in an international school.
RO3. To investigate how teachers adapt well-being-related teaching and support practices to address cultural diversity in the classroom.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do students perceive the cultural relevance of well-being-related content in an international school?
RQ2. What forms of cultural friction do students experience when engaging with well-being-related learning in an international school?
RQ3. How do teachers adapt well-being-related teaching and support practices to address cultural diversity in the classroom?

Operational Definitions

Cultural Relevance

Cultural relevance refers to the extent to which students perceive well-being learning content as meaningful, relatable, and connected to their cultural backgrounds, values, and lived experiences. It includes the degree to which the examples, concepts, and discussions used in well-being lessons reflect perspectives students can identify with. In this study, cultural relevance is understood through students' perceptions of the well-being curriculum in an international school context.

Cultural Friction

Cultural friction refers to the difficulty or discomfort students experience when well-being content feels distant from their cultural values, family expectations, or lived experiences. It is not limited to open conflict; it can appear as misunderstanding, hesitation, silence, resistance, or reduced participation when students encounter topics such as mental health, emotional expression, identity, family roles, or help-seeking in culturally unfamiliar ways. The study explores cultural friction through students' reported experiences of unease, confusion, or disconnection in well-being learning.

Teacher Adaptation

Teacher adaptation refers to the practical ways teachers adjust well-being teaching for culturally diverse learners. It includes how teachers select examples, explain sensitive concepts, manage discussion, respond to discomfort, and make space for different cultural viewpoints. The study examines teacher adaptation through teachers' classroom strategies, curriculum choices, and communication practices when teaching well-being topics.

Conceptual Framework

In international schools, well-being curricula address far more than emotional wellness and personal growth; they also touch on cultural values, identity, communication norms, and diverse understandings of mental health. Students from different backgrounds therefore perceive and engage with this content in distinct ways. The international school context is not a neutral backdrop: although students study the same curriculum, they come from different national, cultural, and family backgrounds, so their values and understandings of personal issues vary considerably.

How the curriculum is delivered shapes how students experience the classroom. Some content feels personally meaningful and connected to students' backgrounds, reflecting cultural relevance; other content makes students feel uncomfortable, confused, or in conflict with their own understandings, reflecting cultural friction. For example, when a discussion touches on clothing or personal expression, some students engage openly while others withdraw because they feel uncomfortable. Within this process, teacher adaptation becomes the key factor in responding to such differences, reducing friction, and creating a more inclusive classroom. Teachers' ability to notice shifts in students' responses, allow the choice not to participate, and provide a safe, understanding space is therefore essential. These relationships are summarised in Figure 1.1.

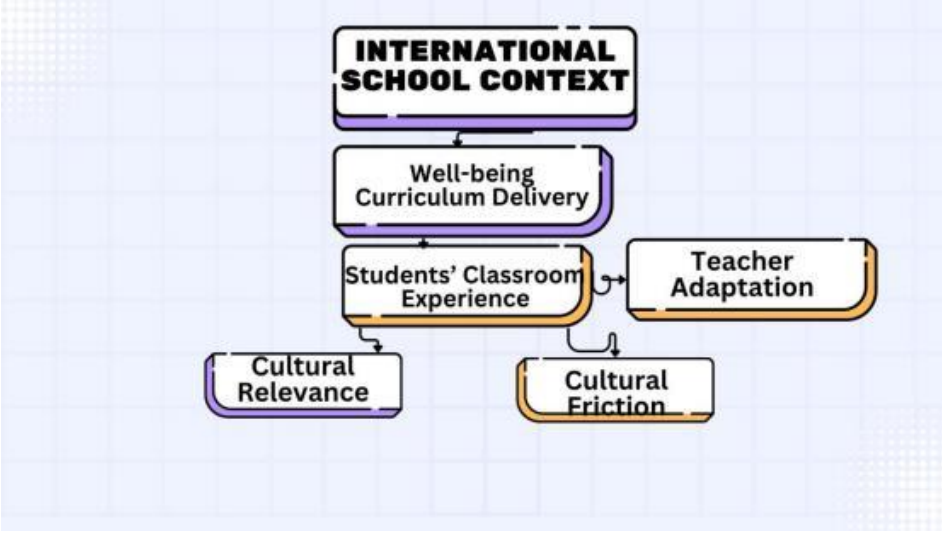

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it is situated in a real international school where well-being education is offered to students from a range of national, cultural, and family backgrounds. Although these students follow the same A-Level curriculum, they do not necessarily understand well-being topics in the same way: their views on mental health, identity, family relationships, and emotional expression are shaped by different cultural values and

expectations. The study therefore shows how students actually experience this learning in a multicultural classroom—a matter of growing importance as cultural differences and diverse viewpoints become more visible in students' daily lives, since learning to understand others and respond respectfully is part of living in a diverse community.

The study also clarifies how students perceive cultural relevance and friction. Some topics connect closely with students' backgrounds, while others produce discomfort or hesitation, particularly in sensitive areas such as mental health, identity, family expectations, trauma, gender, and personal expression. This matters because willingness to participate depends not only on content but also on whether the classroom feels safe, relatable, and culturally respectful. The findings thus have practical value for teachers and counsellors—who can recognise that behaviour may reflect cultural beliefs, offer flexible ways to participate, and create a non-judgemental atmosphere—and for curriculum designers and school leaders, suggesting that well-being curricula should not be treated as culturally neutral programmes delivered identically to all students.

More concretely, the study is intended to benefit several groups. For students, it draws attention to the conditions under which well-being learning feels safe and relevant, so that more learners can engage without having to set aside their own cultural ways of expressing emotion. For teachers and counsellors, it offers practical guidance on reading culturally shaped responses such as silence or hesitation, on varying how students are invited to participate, and on establishing non-judgemental discussion rules. For school leaders, it provides evidence for reviewing whether well-being provision rests on a single cultural perspective and for designing more practical, classroom-focused professional development rather than general diversity training. For curriculum designers, it cautions against treating well-being content as a culturally neutral programme delivered identically to all students. In these ways, the study is meant to be directly useful to practice, and not only to add to academic understanding of cultural relevance and friction in international school well-being education.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study uses a small-scale sample: data were collected from a limited number of student participants and one well-being teacher, so the findings reflect one specific school rather than international schools in China generally. Second, the study was conducted at Britannia International School (BIS) in China, a British-curriculum A-Level school; its particular curriculum, campus culture, and student diversity together shaped the results, which therefore cannot be transferred directly to schools with different systems or environments. Third, because the study involves sensitive topics such as well-being, cultural identity, mental health, and family relationships, some students may have given reserved answers rather than fully sharing their experiences, and the researcher's connection with the school may have made participants more restrained. Finally, as a study conducted at a single point in time, it captures participants' views only at that moment, even though perceptions of cultural relevance and friction may change as students adapt to the school and gain further experience of well-being learning.

Conclusion

In summary, cultural diversity is far more than a passive background feature of international schools. It directly shapes how students absorb content, participate in discussion, and feel emotionally secure when sensitive topics arise, so the same well-being lesson can produce very different learning experiences. Previous research has demonstrated the value of culturally responsive teaching, but most of it remains at a general level or focuses on other disciplines. Well-being education, which involves highly personal and culturally sensitive content and can easily produce discomfort without careful management, has received insufficient targeted attention. This study addresses that gap by exploring students' experiences of cultural relevance and friction in well-being lessons and teachers' adaptive strategies, moving beyond surface discussions of diversity toward a focused analysis of well-being education in international schools.

Literature Review

Overview

This chapter reviews literature on cultural diversity and well-being education in schools. It first considers how students' cultural backgrounds influence classroom interaction, participation, and learning. It then focuses on well-being education, because well-being lessons involve sensitive topics such as identity, emotions, mental health, family relationships, and personal values that are not experienced in the same way by all students. The chapter also discusses teacher adaptation, before presenting the theoretical framework and identifying the gap addressed by this study.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on three perspectives: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, and Global Citizenship Education. Together they help explain why students from different backgrounds respond differently to well-being lessons, how teachers can respond to those differences, and why intercultural understanding matters. Hofstede's theory, particularly the individualism–collectivism dimension, explains how cultural values shape responses to topics such as emotional expression, identity, autonomy, family relationships, and mental health: students from more individualist cultures tend to be comfortable with open self-expression, while those from more collectivist cultures may give greater weight to privacy, family expectations, and group harmony. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy frames the teacher's role, suggesting that teaching should connect with students' cultural backgrounds and real experiences; in well-being education, where topics are personal and sensitive, teachers need to adjust examples, discussion methods, and support so that students from different backgrounds feel included. Global Citizenship Education provides a broader view of the international school context, emphasising intercultural understanding and respect for diversity, so that well-being education is seen not only as personal development but also as learning to live within culturally diverse communities.

Review of Related Studies

Cultural Diversity and Classroom Participation

Cultural diversity in international schools extends beyond nationality and language to differences in values, family expectations, communication styles, and understandings of identity, relationships, and belonging. As a result, students do not interpret content, interaction, or participation in the same way, even when they share the same school. This

becomes especially significant where students have lived across countries, languages, and social systems: some identify strongly with a cultural background, while others feel represented by no single category. Ferrero (2024) notes that cultural gaps and curricular bias are common in international school curriculum design, so that curriculum frameworks do not automatically match students' lived experiences. In some East Asian contexts, for example, families place strong emphasis on examination results, and well-being lessons may be treated as less important than core subjects, which can affect how students perceive the value and relevance of the curriculum.

Teachers' work in culturally diverse schools is shaped not only by individual competence but also by the changing diversity of the school (Ulbricht et al., 2022). Where a school culture is strongly influenced by a Western educational mindset that values open discussion, self-expression, and critical debate, students from more reserved backgrounds may find it difficult to participate in the expected way. Some East Asian students choose to remain silent in order to avoid open argument or to show respect by listening rather than challenging others. In such cases, silence should not be read simply as a lack of understanding or critical thinking; it can indicate a mismatch between classroom participation expectations and students' communication habits. This is particularly important in well-being lessons, where discussion of mental health, identity, family relationships, and trauma requires students to share personal views in ways that may be culturally unfamiliar or uncomfortable.

Cultural Relevance and Well-being Education

Cultural relevance is especially important in well-being education, because well-being learning is not only about emotional health or personal development; it also involves identity, family relationships, personal boundaries, emotional expression, respect, and social expectations, all closely shaped by culture and lived experience. For this reason, students in culturally diverse international schools may not experience well-being content in the same way. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that meaningful learning depends on whether teaching reflects students' cultural realities, and Gay (2018) adds that culturally responsive teaching involves not only content but also classroom interaction, communication styles, and the learning climate. Some East Asian students, for instance, tend to observe first and participate verbally only when they feel safe, and in highly discussion-based classrooms—especially as a minority—they may appear quieter or less willing to challenge others directly. Such silence reflects how culture shapes communication habits, such as showing respect through listening, avoiding open argument, or waiting until trust is established before speaking.

Teachers can respond by adjusting classroom design: providing longer wait time, using smaller group discussions, allowing written reflection before verbal sharing, or offering different ways for students to express their views. These adaptations help students participate meaningfully without feeling pressured to abandon their cultural communication patterns. This connects to the idea of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), which argues that education should not only recognise cultural differences but also support and sustain students' cultural ways of being. From this perspective, the goal is not to remove differences or require students to participate in a single, individualist manner, but to create classroom conditions that respect diversity and allow different forms of learning, communication, and identity to coexist. Cultural relevance should therefore leave space for different cultural understandings of the self, relationships, respect, family expectations, emotional expression, and belonging.

Cultural Friction in Classroom Interaction

Because well-being education deals with personal and culturally sensitive issues, it can also generate cultural friction. This friction arises not only from formal lesson topics but also from classroom interaction, peer behaviour, and everyday assumptions about what is acceptable, respectful, or normal. In multicultural schools, the same behaviour may be interpreted very differently depending on students' cultural or religious backgrounds; issues relating to bodily privacy, religion, identity, gender, or political conflict carry different meanings for different students, and what some regard as playful or harmless may be experienced by others as deeply offensive. Cultural or religious symbols may likewise be misunderstood, imitated, or misinterpreted by students who do not recognise their significance. Cultural friction in classroom life is therefore often interactional rather than abstract, emerging not only through direct discussion of sensitive topics but also through implicit norms embedded in materials, peer interaction, and school practices. This is especially significant in international schools influenced by Western-oriented curriculum philosophy, where well-being teaching is still shaped by dominant ideas about emotional openness, individual reflection, and classroom discussion. Existing research does not always explain clearly how such friction develops in everyday interaction, particularly when discomfort remains unspoken until it surfaces through conflict or withdrawal.

Student Voice and Emotional Safety

Students learning in a new cultural environment may be unfamiliar with others' boundaries, expectations, or preferred ways of expressing disagreement and discomfort. When discussion involves sensitive topics such as identity, mental health, family relationships, or personal values, students may respond cautiously, offer neutral opinions, or remain silent—not because they have no view, but because they do not yet feel safe enough to express it. The absence of open disagreement should therefore not be read too quickly as the absence of cultural tension. Students may regulate their speech to avoid embarrassment, misunderstanding, conflict, or exclusion, so that friction remains hidden until it becomes visible through a stronger incident. Listening to student voice is thus important not only for understanding what students think about well-being content, but also for recognising what they may be withholding or softening; what teachers hear in class may be the safest version of students' voices rather than their fullest response.

Conner et al. (2024) show that student voice practices are more likely to develop when classrooms are supported by strong student–teacher relationships, meaningful choice, and differentiated teaching. Writing from students' perspectives, Piipponen (2023) similarly shows that meaningful intercultural learning depends on interaction being experienced as connected, reciprocal, and emotionally genuine. Hernández et al. (2025) further find that culturally relevant support is linked with stronger emotional and behavioural engagement, implying that students participate more openly when they feel culturally supported. A limitation of existing work, however, is that participation is often treated as visible classroom behaviour, while less attention is given to students who prefer to regulate, soften, or withhold their responses in culturally sensitive discussion.

Teacher Adaptation and Responsive Practice

Across these studies, teacher adaptation emerges as central to managing cultural difference in well-being classrooms. Responsive practice involves more than selecting culturally relevant

content; it also includes establishing safe discussion rules, supporting different participation styles, and building a respectful, non-judgemental atmosphere. Because well-being topics are personal and sensitive, the way a teacher introduces and manages discussion can be as important as the content itself. Yet teacher adaptation also has limits: a safe classroom cannot, on its own, resolve deeper mismatches when curriculum content remains grounded in Western assumptions about emotional expression and individual choice. The literature therefore suggests that meaningful adaptation requires both responsive teaching strategies and broader attention to whose experiences are treated as normal within the curriculum.

Conclusion

The literature shows that cultural diversity shapes how students experience well-being learning, and that cultural relevance and friction are closely tied to identity, family, emotion, and communication. It also shows that teacher adaptation is essential but bounded. However, most research remains general or focused on other subjects, and few studies examine students' experiences of cultural relevance and friction specifically in international school well-being classrooms, or how teachers adapt their practice in response. This study addresses that gap by combining student and teacher perspectives within a single international school context.

Methodology

Overview

This chapter presents the research design, population and sample, instruments, data collection, and analysis used to investigate how cultural friction shapes the teaching and learning of well-being in an international school. The study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, because the research questions require both descriptive insight into students' perceptions and an in-depth understanding of teacher adaptation. A student questionnaire primarily addresses Research Questions 1 and 2 by gathering descriptive data on students' perceptions of cultural relevance and the forms of friction they experience, while a semi-structured teacher interview primarily addresses Research Question 3 by exploring how teaching and curriculum practices are adapted, and also provides context for the first two questions.

Research Design

The qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design was chosen because the research questions require both descriptive evidence of students' perceptions and in-depth exploration of teacher practice. The qualitative component is dominant, as cultural friction is a context-sensitive phenomenon closely tied to classroom interaction, teacher interpretation, and curriculum adaptation; the quantitative component is supplementary, providing descriptive data on students' views of the curriculum and their experiences. The quantitative strand used a short Likert-scale questionnaire administered to well-being students to capture perceptions of cultural relevance and the forms of friction experienced, while the qualitative strand used a semi-structured teacher interview to gain in-depth insight into how teaching is adapted to cultural diversity and how friction manifests in practice. Examining the issue from both student and teacher perspectives enables a comprehensive understanding of cultural friction in well-being classrooms.

Research Population and Sample

Because the study combines quantitative and qualitative strands, the two samples are described separately. For the quantitative strand, Year 12 students formed the population, as this was the only cohort taking formal well-being sessions at the school. Of the 10 current Year 12 students, seven submitted valid questionnaires, a 70% response rate; the questionnaire aimed to provide descriptive insight into this single classroom context. For the qualitative strand, the study recruited the school's one well-being teacher, who delivered all well-being courses and had daily contact with the students. This participant was appropriate because the interview focused on how teachers adapt teaching in culturally diverse well-being classrooms; the aim was detailed, specific understanding rather than comparison across teachers. As this teacher had taught the questionnaire respondents over time, the interview data related closely to students' classroom experiences and helped to answer Research Question 3.

Research Instruments

Two researcher-designed instruments were used: a semi-structured teacher interview and a short student questionnaire, both built from the research questions and conceptual framework and focused on cultural relevance, cultural friction, students' learning experiences, and teachers' adaptive practices. The teacher interview explored how friction appeared in well-being teaching and how the teacher adjusted practice in response to students' different backgrounds. Before the interview, the teacher was informed about confidentiality, voluntary participation, and audio-recording consent. The interview comprised five main open-ended questions, with follow-up questions used where further explanation was needed, focusing on cross-cultural learning challenges, the cultural relevance of discussions, and the teacher's use of examples, communication methods, and activities. The semi-structured format kept the interview focused on the research questions while allowing the teacher to share detailed experiences. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; the full protocol appears in Appendix A.

The student questionnaire collected descriptive data for Research Questions 1 and 2. It included basic demographic questions and five Likert-scale statements answered on a five-point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The items addressed students' perceptions of the cultural relevance of content, the inclusion of multicultural perspectives, unfamiliar topics, emotional comfort during sensitive discussions, and the connection between content and personal experience. Rather than a standardised measure, the questionnaire served as a simple descriptive tool for this specific classroom context, using clear language so that all respondents could understand the items. The full questionnaire appears in Appendix B.

Data Analysis Procedure

The teacher interview was audio-recorded with permission and transcribed for analysis. The study used Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis, in which themes were developed from the data rather than imposed in advance. This approach suited the study because it allowed the teacher's real experiences, views, and practices to emerge, with analysis focused on cultural relevance, cultural friction, and adaptive teaching. The questionnaire data were summarised using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) to describe patterns in students' perceptions.

Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Questionnaire items were designed from the research objectives, theoretical framework, and reviewed literature to ensure they related closely to the study's themes, and clear language was used so students could understand them easily. As the questionnaire was a descriptive tool rather than a standardised scale, its dependability was supported through item clarity, alignment with the research questions, and consistent administration. For the interview, several steps improved trustworthiness: it was audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim to keep the data accurate; a consistent question structure was followed, with follow-up questions where the teacher raised important experiences; and during analysis the transcript was read several times and themes checked against the data and the research questions. Using two data sources strengthened the study, as the questionnaire captured students' views while the interview provided the teacher's perspective. Although the sample was small and limited to one school, combining the two sources offered a fuller understanding of cultural relevance, cultural friction, and teacher adaptation.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, combining a student questionnaire and a teacher interview. The questionnaire collected descriptive data on students' perceptions of cultural relevance and friction in well-being lessons, while the interview provided deeper insight into how the teacher adapts practice in a diverse classroom. The chapter also outlined sampling, instrument design, data collection, analysis, and quality measures, including clear questionnaire design, consistent administration, interview recording and transcription, thematic analysis, and the use of both student and teacher data.

Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings, organised around the three research questions and drawn from two data sources: the student questionnaire and the teacher interview. It begins with an overview of respondents and data, followed by the descriptive results of the questionnaire and the thematic findings from the interview, before presenting findings by research question.

Respondent Profile and Data Overview

For the questionnaire, the accessible group consisted of 10 Year 12 students, as Year 12 was the only year group involved in the relevant well-being practice at the time of the study. Of these, seven completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 70%. Although the number is small, the responses provide useful descriptive insight into how students in this particular context experienced cultural relevance and friction, and the findings are therefore presented as context-specific rather than broadly generalisable. For the qualitative component, one semi-structured interview was conducted with the teacher responsible for the relevant well-being teaching, used to understand how culturally sensitive issues were managed in practice and how teaching was adapted to the diversity of the group.

Descriptive Statistics of the Student Questionnaire

Table 4.1

Descriptive Statistics of Questionnaire Items

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Topics relevant to cultural background	7	3	5	3.57	0.79
Examples reflect diverse cultural perspectives	7	3	5	3.71	0.76
Difficulty relating to unfamiliar perspectives	7	2	5	2.71	1.11
Comfort discussing sensitive topics	7	1	5	3.00	1.41
Connection to own experiences	7	2	5	3.43	0.98

As Table 4.1 shows, students neither rejected the well-being discussions nor experienced them as strongly connected to their own cultural backgrounds; what emerges instead is an uneven sense of relevance. The classroom offered content that students could relate to, but it did not fully reflect the diversity of their real-life experiences.

Item 1 had a mean of 3.57 (SD = 0.79) and Item 2 the highest mean of 3.71 (SD = 0.76), indicating that students generally felt the topics were moderately relevant and that different cultural perspectives were included to some degree. Both scores, however, were moderate rather than high: students did not see the content as irrelevant, but nor did they feel it fully represented their own backgrounds. This suggests that teachers should design discussions more closely connected to students' cultural backgrounds within the curriculum framework. Because the curriculum outline often provides only broad guidance, teachers need to extend and adapt content according to the national and cultural backgrounds present in the class; when students feel topics relate to their own lives, they may be more willing to participate meaningfully.

Item 3 had a mean of 2.71 (SD = 1.11), suggesting that cultural friction was not a constant problem, although the spread of responses shows that some students felt more disconnected than others; friction was experienced more strongly by some and depended on the topic discussed. The clearest difference appears in Item 4: comfort discussing sensitive topics had a mean of 3.00 with the highest standard deviation in the data (SD = 1.41), showing markedly different levels of comfort—some students spoke openly while others felt more cautious. This is an important finding for a well-being classroom, as it suggests the discussion space was not equally safe for all students when topics became personal or sensitive. Item 5 had a mean of 3.43 (SD = 0.98), indicating that students could connect the content with their own experiences to a moderate degree.

Overall, the classroom created some opportunities for reflection, but students did not experience these equally. The main pattern was not rejection of the content but unevenness: students reported moderate cultural relevance while their emotional comfort varied widely. The issue, therefore, was not that the curriculum was unsuitable, but that its emotional impact was uneven, suggesting that teachers need to manage discussion carefully in light of students' differing comfort levels.

Reliability of the Questionnaire

As the questionnaire was a simple descriptive tool rather than a formal standardised scale, attention focused on whether the items were clear, matched the research questions, and were presented consistently.

Thematic Findings from the Teacher Interview

Table 4.2

Coding and Theme Development from the Teacher Interview

Initial coding focus	Category	Final theme
Indirect emotional expression; reluctance to disclose trauma; preference for group harmony	Cultural differences in emotional expression and discussion style	Differences in student responses across cultural backgrounds
Western school culture; Western values in well-being lessons; mismatch with East Asian and Middle Eastern values	Limited cultural alignment of lesson content	Well-being content is influenced by Western-centred perspectives
No judgement; embrace diversity; inclusive environment; sharing as strategy	Classroom adaptation and discussion management	Teacher adaptation focuses on inclusion and non-judgement

Theme 1: Differences in Student Responses Across Cultural Backgrounds

The interview indicated that students respond differently to sensitive well-being topics, and that these differences relate to cultural norms around emotional expression, privacy, and group interaction. Some students were more reserved, while others were more comfortable sharing personal feelings openly. The teacher explained that students from high-context cultures “tend to keep a group harmony,” whereas students from low-context cultures “can express their emotions more straightforward” and are more willing to disclose personal feelings in class. This suggests that cultural friction stems not only from the topics themselves but also from differing cultural views about how private or emotional matters should be discussed.

Theme 2: Western-Centred Framing of Well-being Content

A second theme was that some well-being content was framed through Western educational and cultural values. The teacher noted that certain activities and content did not always match the values and experiences of all students, stating that “most of our lessons in our school culture are western centric” and that well-being lessons “reflect the western value.” The teacher also pointed to possible value conflicts between Western, Middle Eastern, and East Asian cultures. This suggests that even when students do not openly reject the content, Western-centred framing can make lessons more relatable for some cultural groups than for others.

Theme 3: Teacher Adaptation Through Inclusive Discussion Practice

The third theme concerned how the teacher adapted to a diverse classroom. Rather than changing the formal curriculum, the teacher focused on discussion rules, communication

methods, and classroom atmosphere, aiming to create a safe space where students could participate without feeling judged. The teacher articulated this principle directly—"we have to set the rule… no judgement"—and emphasised the need to "embrace the diversity" and build an inclusive space for self-expression. In this study, therefore, teacher adaptation depended less on large curriculum changes than on how the teacher managed discussion, responded to students, and created emotional safety. The teacher's role was not only to introduce sensitive topics but to help students engage with them safely and respectfully.

Findings by Research Question

Findings for RQ1

Students experienced different levels of cultural relevance in well-being lessons. They did not regard the topics and examples as irrelevant, and the classroom reflected a basic level of inclusiveness; however, the activities did not fully reflect the varied cultural backgrounds and life experiences of all students.

Findings for RQ2

Cultural friction was most evident when discussions involved sensitive topics such as mental health, identity, trauma, and family issues. The data did not show serious learning barriers for all students, but there were clear differences in comfort levels, indicating that friction appeared situationally rather than constantly. Students' willingness to participate was shaped by differing cultural norms around emotional expression, privacy, and public discussion.

Findings for RQ3

The teacher adapted teaching mainly by managing discussion methods rather than changing the formal curriculum, focusing on a non-judgemental, inclusive atmosphere, encouraging respect for cultural differences, and handling sensitive topics carefully. Teacher adaptation thus depended less on curriculum design and more on communication, classroom atmosphere, and flexible discussion strategies.

Summary

Organised around the three research questions, the findings show that students experienced a moderate level of cultural relevance in well-being lessons, and that cultural friction was not constant but became more noticeable during sensitive, personal discussion. The findings also suggest that teachers should not judge engagement only by surface behaviour: some students stay silent not because they do not understand but because they do not feel safe enough to share, while others participate actively yet superficially. Teachers therefore need greater sensitivity in distinguishing surface participation from genuine engagement.

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter discusses the meaning of the main findings on cultural relevance, cultural friction, and teacher adaptation in well-being learning. The discussion is organised around the three research questions and then considers theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion by Research Question

Research Question 1

The findings show that students did not see the content as irrelevant, but nor did they feel it was strongly connected to their own cultural backgrounds; the content was partly relevant but uneven. This matters because a classroom that looks diverse on the surface does not necessarily make all students feel equally represented. The problem was not that the content failed, but that it connected more easily with some students than others. This echoes Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2018), who argue that learning becomes more meaningful when teaching reflects students' cultural identities; students responded more positively when topics were familiar, meaningful, or connected to their experiences. A quiet student, for example, may be read by the teacher as lacking critical thinking, when the silence in fact reflects cultural factors such as face-saving, respect for group harmony, politeness, or avoidance of direct disagreement. Without this understanding, teachers may misread silence as a lack of ability rather than as culturally shaped communication.

Well-being education should fit students' cultural contexts rather than serve as a universal model. In this study, some students found well-being topics meaningful, while others felt that emotional expression, personal choice, and self-disclosure did not fully match their family or cultural values, which helps explain why cultural relevance was only moderate. Cultural relevance does not arise automatically in international schools; teachers need to build it through careful teaching, suitable examples, and sensitive discussion, designing lessons that connect more deeply with students' own experiences and perspectives.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 concerned the forms of cultural friction students experienced when learning well-being topics. The central issue was not only whether students understood a lesson but whether they felt comfortable enough to join the discussion; some understood the topic yet still felt uneasy talking about it in class. Students from different family, religious, and cultural backgrounds held different views about gender roles, relationships, and personal boundaries: some found these discussions meaningful, while others felt embarrassed or declined to take part. Consistent with Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, students from high-context cultures tended to preserve group harmony and avoid sharing personal feelings publicly, whereas those from low-context cultures were more comfortable expressing feelings directly.

This connects to transformative social and emotional learning, which Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2019) argue should incorporate culture, identity, student voice, belonging, and engagement rather than teaching general emotional skills alone. The moderate scores in this study indicate that the lessons gave students some opportunity to reflect but did not always help every student feel personally connected. Cultural friction was thus produced by several factors together: students' cultural backgrounds, the sensitivity of the topic, classroom expectations, and how comfortable students felt. The implication for teachers is that hesitant students are not necessarily uninterested; silence may signal a value placed on privacy, respect, modesty, or emotional safety. Simply asking students to “speak more” is unlikely to help; teachers should instead offer varied ways to participate, such as written reflection, paired discussion, small-group sharing, or private responses.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 examined how the teacher adapted well-being teaching to cultural diversity, with the aim of helping students take part without feeling unsafe, embarrassed, or judged. Adaptation in well-being education is thus not only about what teachers teach but also about how they introduce and discuss sensitive topics. This aligns with culturally responsive pedagogy: Gay (2018) explains that teaching should respect students' cultural backgrounds and make learning meaningful, and in this study the teacher's adaptation reduced discomfort and made discussion more respectful and inclusive. However, the findings also show that adaptation has limits. A safe classroom does not, by itself, resolve deeper cultural mismatches in the curriculum; if content remains grounded in Western ideas about emotional expression and individual choice, the teacher's support cannot make it equally meaningful for every student (Le, 2024). A safe atmosphere is necessary but not sufficient.

Teachers therefore also need to design varied ways for students to participate—guiding questions, written reflection, paired discussion, and small-group sharing—which help reserved students engage more comfortably. Teacher adaptation in this study functioned as support and mediation rather than a complete solution: the teacher set clear discussion rules, encouraged respect for different views, and allowed flexible participation so students could feel safer. This has implications for schools: teachers of well-being lessons need more than a general awareness of diversity. They need practical training in managing emotional sharing, recognising different participation styles, and leading sensitive discussions, without which inclusion does not become genuine inclusive practice.

Theoretical Contribution

The study shows how Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, and Global Citizenship Education can be used together to understand well-being learning in an international school. It does not develop new theory but applies these perspectives to explain cultural relevance, friction, and teacher adaptation in practice. Hofstede's theory helps explain why students from different backgrounds respond differently to sensitive topics, while the findings also caution that culture should not be treated as a fixed predictor of behaviour, since friction appeared only when sensitive topics, classroom expectations, and comfort levels combined. The study extends Culturally Responsive Pedagogy to well-being education, showing that responsive teaching involves not only selecting relevant content but also establishing safe discussion rules, supporting different participation styles, and building a respectful, non-judgemental atmosphere. Finally, it connects Global Citizenship Education to everyday practice, indicating that cross-cultural understanding and respect must be supported through inclusive discussion methods, awareness of comfort levels, and respect for different forms of expression.

Practical Implications

The findings show that cultural diversity affects not only how students understand well-being lessons but also how safe they feel during discussion, so teachers need to consider both content and how students are asked to participate. Whole-class discussion remains useful but should not be the only option; written reflection, paired discussion, small-group work, and anonymous responses can help students take part without feeling exposed. Teachers should not assume that all students share the same views about emotional openness, family

boundaries, identity, or respectful behaviour, since a topic that seems ordinary to the teacher may feel sensitive to some students. At the institutional level, enrolling students from different cultures is not enough: a school may look multicultural yet still rely on narrow assumptions about participation and emotional expression. School leaders should therefore provide training in cross-cultural communication, different participation styles, emotional safety, and the management of sensitive discussion. If well-being education is to support all students, lesson examples and discussion topics should not depend too heavily on one dominant cultural perspective; while not every culture can feature in every lesson, teachers and schools should consider carefully which assumptions are built into lessons and whose experiences are treated as normal.

Limitations of the Study

The study was small in scale and conducted in one school using limited data. First, the questionnaire included only seven responses from a group of 10 Year 12 students; although the response rate was high, the total was small, so the results are descriptive rather than representative. Second, the study was conducted in a single international school, and such schools differ considerably in student background, culture, curriculum, and approach to well-being, so the findings cannot be transferred directly. Third, the qualitative component relied on one teacher interview, which, while detailed, reflects a single professional perspective; including more teachers, counsellors, or pastoral staff would have deepened the analysis. There are also instrument limitations: the questionnaire was a short descriptive tool rather than a standardised scale. In addition, both instruments relied on self-reported data—students may have softened their answers, and the teacher's responses combined interpretation and observation—so the data cannot fully capture all classroom experiences. Finally, the study captured a single point in time and focused only on Year 12, so it cannot show how experiences change over time or whether younger students would respond similarly.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

Teachers need to be more flexible when teaching sensitive topics such as mental health, identity, family relationships, trauma, and gender, which are valuable for students even though not all feel comfortable discussing them publicly. Speaking in front of the class should not be treated as the only sign of engagement; some students understand and care about a topic yet prefer not to share personal feelings openly. Teachers should also set clear discussion rules, making it understood that respectful disagreement is allowed and that no one will be required to share personal experiences in order to take part.

Recommendations for School and Institutional Action

Schools should review whether their well-being teaching relies too heavily on one dominant cultural perspective, recognising that enrolling students from many backgrounds does not automatically make the curriculum feel culturally balanced. They should examine whether lesson materials and discussion methods reflect different family values, emotional expectations, cultural sensitivities, and real-life experiences. Professional development should also be more practical: general diversity training can raise awareness but may not adequately prepare teachers to lead sensitive discussions in multicultural classrooms.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should include more students and more international schools to test whether similar findings hold across different environments, curricula, and student groups. Studies should also incorporate more professional perspectives, inviting additional teachers, counsellors, or pastoral leaders to explain how friction is managed in practice. Comparing different year groups or programme levels would be valuable, as younger and older students may respond differently to sensitive topics. Finally, longitudinal research would help: because this study captured a single point in time, it cannot show whether students become more comfortable and open over time, whereas a long-term study could reveal whether cultural friction weakens, strengthens, or changes as students and teachers build stronger relationships.

Conclusion

The findings show that students found the well-being lessons moderately culturally relevant: the lessons were meaningful to some students but did not fully connect with all students' cultural backgrounds and experiences. Cultural friction became more common when lessons addressed sensitive topics such as mental health, identity, family relationships, and trauma, and the key issue was not only whether students understood the content but whether they felt comfortable discussing it publicly. Teacher adaptation played an important role in managing these differences: by creating a respectful, inclusive, and non-judgemental classroom, the teacher helped students feel safer engaging with sensitive topics. Overall, the study shows that cultural diversity in international schools does not automatically make well-being teaching culturally balanced. Cultural relevance must be actively built, cultural friction must be identified, and teacher adaptation must be supported through careful classroom practice.

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