

Inclusive Education and Cultural Intelligence in a Changing World: Reframing Core Skills for Canada's Diverse Classrooms and Workplaces

Oladunni Tola-Adewumi

Abstract

Purpose: This qualitative study explores how Cultural Intelligence (CQ) functions as a foundational competency for fostering inclusion in Canadian educational and workplace contexts, addressing the urgent need for culturally responsive practices as Canada approaches unprecedented demographic transformation by 2041. **Design/Methodology:** Using semi-structured interviews with 11 participants from diverse professional backgrounds, this research employs both narrative and thematic analysis to examine lived experiences of CQ implementation, barriers, and enablers across sectors. **Findings:** Five key themes emerged: (1) CQ as embodied practice requiring movement beyond awareness to action, (2) systemic barriers impeding CQ development, (3) CQ's direct relationship with collective well-being and psychological safety, (4) leadership as cultural bridge-building through vulnerability and distributed expertise, and (5) the critical intersection of CQ with AI and technological futures. **Originality/Value:** This study reframes CQ from a 'soft skill' to a 'survival competency' essential for navigating Canada's demographic shift, offering a practice-based model that extends existing CQ theory while highlighting the urgency of systemic integration across educational, organizational, and technological domains

Keywords: cultural intelligence, qualitative research, inclusion, Canadian demographics, organizational diversity, relational leadership, well-being

Introduction

Canada stands at a demographic crossroads. By 2041, nearly half of the Canadian population will be either racialized or foreign-born, fundamentally transforming the social fabric of educational institutions, workplaces, and communities (Statistics Canada, 2022). This unprecedented shift demands more than policy adjustments or diversity statements; it requires a fundamental reconceptualization of how we understand, develop, and implement cultural competencies across all sectors of society.

Cultural Intelligence (CQ)—defined as an individual's capacity to function effectively in contexts characterized by cultural diversity (Earley & Ang, 2003)—emerges as a critical competency for navigating this transformation. Yet despite growing recognition of its importance, significant gaps persist in understanding how CQ manifests in practice, particularly within Canadian contexts where unique dynamics of Indigenous reconciliation, official bilingualism, and regional diversity create complex cultural landscapes that existing CQ frameworks inadequately address.

The practical problem is urgent and multifaceted. As one participant in this study, a nurse manager with over two decades of experience, articulated: "If I'm in my country and I'm told that in 10 or 20 years from now, half of the country is going to be immigrants and not people that look like me—that's a scary thought, right? But it's up to us coming in to respect what we find... We are coming here because we think it's a better place." This tension between demographic transformation and social cohesion underscores the necessity of developing CQ not as an optional enhancement but as a foundational competency for collective survival and flourishing.

Theoretically, while CQ has been well-established as a multidimensional construct comprising metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral capabilities (Ang & Dyne, 2008), limited research examines how these dimensions translate into lived experiences within specific national contexts. Moreover, the intersection of CQ with emerging challenges—particularly the rise of AI-mediated interactions and the imperatives of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples—remains largely unexplored in the literature.

This qualitative study addresses these gaps by exploring three central research questions:

1. How do professionals conceptualize and enact CQ in Canadian educational and workplace contexts?
2. What barriers and enablers influence CQ development and application in practice?
3. How does CQ intersect with well-being, leadership effectiveness, and technological integration?

Through narrative and thematic analysis of interviews with 11 participants representing diverse professional backgrounds—from education and healthcare to technology and administration—this research offers a grounded understanding of CQ as it operates "on the ground" in Canadian contexts. The findings reveal CQ not as an abstract competency but as embodied practice, deeply intertwined with issues of power, vulnerability, and systemic change. This article proceeds as follows: First, we review the theoretical foundations of CQ and its evolution within educational and organizational contexts. Second, we describe our qualitative methodology and analytical approach. Third, we present our findings through an integration of participant narratives and thematic analysis. Finally, we discuss theoretical contributions,

practical implications, and future directions for CQ research and implementation in Canada's evolving demographic landscape.

Literature Review

Cultural Intelligence: Theoretical Foundations

Cultural Intelligence represents a distinct form of intelligence focused on intercultural effectiveness. Earley and Ang's (2003) foundational framework conceptualizes CQ as a multidimensional construct encompassing four interrelated capabilities. Metacognitive CQ involves the conscious awareness and strategic thinking about cultural interactions, including planning, monitoring, and adjusting mental models during intercultural encounters. Cognitive CQ encompasses knowledge about how cultures shape behavior, including understanding cultural systems, differences, and their effects on business and social practices. Motivational CQ reflects the drive, interest, and confidence to adapt to multicultural situations, including the willingness to engage with culturally diverse others. Finally, Behavioral CQ manifests as the capability to exhibit appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds (Ang & Dyne, 2008).

Recent research by Sousa (2025) examining CQ in higher education contexts reveals important patterns in how these dimensions manifest in practice. While participants typically demonstrate high levels of motivational, metacognitive, and behavioral CQ, cognitive CQ—the knowledge dimension—consistently shows lower performance. This finding suggests that despite willingness and strategic thinking about cultural interactions, gaps in cultural knowledge persist, highlighting the need for more systematic approaches to developing comprehensive CQ capabilities.

Importantly, CQ extends beyond individual competency to organizational capability. As Livermore, Van Dyne, and Ang (2022) argue, CQ becomes essential for organizations navigating environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). In such contexts, CQ provides the cognitive and behavioral flexibility necessary for adaptive responses to rapidly changing cultural dynamics. This organizational dimension of CQ becomes particularly salient in Canadian contexts, where institutions must simultaneously navigate multiple cultural frameworks including Indigenous worldviews, francophone and anglophone traditions, and increasingly diverse immigrant populations.

CQ in Educational Contexts

Within educational settings, CQ takes on particular significance as both a pedagogical tool and learning outcome. Watkins and Noble (2016) offer a critical perspective on how CQ should function in educational contexts, arguing against superficial approaches that reduce cultural engagement to "unreflexive civility." They contend that genuine CQ requires educators to operate as "intellectual workers" who apply critical inquiry to cultural practices, moving beyond recognition politics toward what they term "reflexive civility." This approach demands that educators not merely acknowledge cultural differences but actively examine the dynamic nature of human cultures and their own positioning within cultural hierarchies.

The development of CQ among educators themselves emerges as a critical factor. Dwyer's (2019) research on university educators' experiences teaching abroad reveals how immersion experiences foster "growth-producing" moments that enhance cultural competency. These experiences develop specific capabilities: adaptability to unexpected situations, genuine interest in students as individuals, comfort with discomfort, and the ability to embrace challenges

as learning opportunities. Significantly, Dwyer found that culturally responsive teaching—using students' cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives as mediums for instruction (Gay, 2002)—requires educators to first develop their own CQ before effectively fostering it in students.

The Canadian educational context presents unique considerations for CQ development. Philpott (2007) highlights how inclusive education in Canada is profoundly linked to cultural and linguistic diversity, with particular attention to the historical marginalization of Indigenous peoples in educational systems. This history, marked by the devastating impacts of residential schools and ongoing systemic discrimination, demands that CQ in Canadian education explicitly address decolonization and reconciliation. As Philpott argues, culturally-defined inclusive education must move beyond deficit models that stigmatize difference, instead celebrating diversity as essential to collective survival and focusing on identifying student strengths rather than weaknesses.

Leadership and Relational Approaches

Contemporary leadership research increasingly emphasizes relational and collaborative approaches as essential for managing culturally diverse environments. Kawalilak et al.'s (2023) concept of "connected leadership" provides a framework particularly relevant to CQ development. This approach recognizes that leadership effectiveness is "grounded in the idea that we come into being in and through relationship," rooting leadership practices in relational epistemology and praxis (Belenky et al., 1986; Thayer-Bacon, 2003).

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for reimagining leadership approaches, particularly in academic settings. Kawalilak et al. (2023) document how the rapid transition to

remote work forced leaders to intentionally cultivate safe and trusting spaces for dialogue and collaboration, deepening commitments to relational ways of knowing and ethics of care (Noddings, 1984). This shift from transactional to relational leadership models proved essential for navigating the uncertainty and cultural complexity of pandemic responses.

The intersection of CQ with adaptive leadership capabilities emerges as particularly significant. Azevedo and Jugdev (n.d.) demonstrate how CQ capabilities promote the mental and behavioral flexibility essential for transformative learning and enhance the application of adaptive skills. Leaders with high CQ can more effectively create synergy from diversity, navigate cultural tensions, and foster inclusive environments where diverse perspectives are valued rather than merely tolerated. This adaptive dimension of leadership becomes crucial in Canadian contexts where leaders must navigate not only ethnic and racial diversity but also generational differences, varying communication styles, and evolving technological landscapes.

Simmons et al. (2019) extend this relational framework by examining the connection between leadership, CQ, and educator well-being. Their research reveals well-being as culturally complex and context-dependent, requiring leaders to avoid "one-size-fits-all" approaches. Instead, culturally intelligent leadership involves recognizing and respecting the "varying complexities and situatedness" of individual experiences, creating conditions where diverse expressions of well-being can flourish.

Technological Mediation and AI Considerations

The emergence of artificial intelligence and digital technologies introduces new dimensions to CQ that existing frameworks inadequately address. While scholarly literature has yet to extensively explore the intersection of CQ and AI, the implications are profound. AI

systems, trained on data that often reflects dominant cultural perspectives, risk perpetuating and amplifying cultural biases unless deliberately designed with CQ principles in mind.

Ledger and Kawalilak's (2020) work on conscientious internationalization provides insights relevant to this technological dimension. They argue for prioritizing ethics over market demands, emphasizing equity, reciprocity, and integrity in global engagements. Applied to AI development, this framework suggests that CQ must inform not only how we interact with technology but how we design, implement, and govern technological systems that will increasingly mediate intercultural interactions.

The challenge extends beyond bias mitigation to fundamental questions about how AI systems understand and respond to cultural diversity. As educational and workplace interactions become increasingly mediated by AI—from automated hiring systems to adaptive learning platforms—the need for culturally intelligent design becomes critical. This requires moving beyond surface-level adaptations (such as language translation) to deeper engagement with how different cultures conceptualize knowledge, relationship, authority, and communication.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of CQ in Canadian professional contexts. The interpretive paradigm was selected for its emphasis on understanding meaning-making processes and its recognition that reality is socially constructed through human interaction and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach aligns with our research questions, which seek to understand not only what CQ is but how it is experienced, enacted, and understood by practitioners in their daily professional lives.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method to balance consistency across participants with flexibility to explore emergent themes. This method allows participants to share their experiences in their own words while ensuring coverage of key theoretical dimensions of CQ. The interview protocol was designed to elicit both specific examples of CQ in practice and broader reflections on its role in fostering inclusion and navigating diversity.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who could provide rich insights into CQ practices across diverse professional contexts. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) work in roles involving regular intercultural interactions, (2) have at least two years of professional experience in Canadian contexts, and (3) represent diverse cultural backgrounds and professional sectors. Recruitment occurred through professional networks, with attention to achieving diversity across multiple dimensions including profession, cultural background, and geographic location within Canada.

Eleven participants were interviewed, representing a range of professional backgrounds:

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Professional Contexts

Participant	Professional role	Experience	Sector
P1	Nurse manager	20+ years	Healthcare
P2	Administrative assistant	5 years	Government
P3	College educator	10 years	Education

Participant	Professional role	Experience	Sector
P4-P7	Various educators/administrators	3-15 years	Education
P8-P9	Business professionals	5-12 years	Corporate
P10	Policy analyst	8 years	Government
P11	Special education professional	7 years	Education

The sample included participants from diverse cultural backgrounds including African, Asian, Caribbean, and European heritage, reflecting the multicultural nature of Canadian professional environments. Gender distribution was approximately balanced, with six female and five male participants. All participants worked in urban centers across different Canadian provinces.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews conducted between September and November 2024. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted virtually via video conferencing platforms, accommodating participants across different geographic locations and respecting ongoing health considerations. The interview protocol, developed through iterative refinement and pilot testing, explored five key areas: (1) experiences with cultural diversity in professional settings, (2) specific examples of CQ in practice, (3) barriers and enablers to CQ development, (4) connections between CQ and well-being, and (5) perspectives on technological and future considerations.

Interviews began with open-ended questions allowing participants to share their understanding and experiences of cultural intelligence organically. For example, participants

were asked: "Can you describe a situation where you had to navigate cultural differences in your workplace?" Follow-up probes explored specific competencies, strategies, and outcomes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. The study received institutional ethics approval, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and removal of identifying information. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and to review transcripts for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Analysis employed a hybrid approach combining narrative and thematic analysis to capture both individual experiences and collective patterns. This dual analytical strategy aligns with our research questions, which seek to understand both particular manifestations of CQ and broader themes across contexts. The analytical process unfolded in several phases:

First Cycle Coding

Initial coding employed both in vivo coding (using participants' own words) and descriptive coding to capture the essence of data segments. This phase remained close to participants' language, preserving the authenticity of their experiences. For instance, when a participant described needing to "come down to their level," this phrase was preserved as an in vivo code, later analyzed for its implications about power dynamics and cultural humility.

Second Cycle Coding

Pattern coding was used to identify recurring themes and relationships between codes. This phase involved grouping first-cycle codes into more abstract categories, identifying

connections, and developing preliminary themes. For example, codes related to "vulnerability," "admitting mistakes," and "learning stance" were grouped under the emerging theme of "leadership as cultural bridge-building."

Narrative Construction

Parallel to thematic analysis, narrative threads were woven from individual interviews to preserve the contextual richness of participants' experiences. Critical incidents were identified and developed into vignettes that illustrate key themes while maintaining narrative coherence.

Reflexive Memoing

Throughout analysis, reflexive memos captured analytical insights, theoretical connections, and researcher reflexivity. These memos served as an audit trail and facilitated deeper engagement with the data.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies enhanced the trustworthiness of findings. Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings with participants for validation and refinement. Triangulation occurred through comparison with existing literature and across different data sources within interviews. The research team maintained an audit trail documenting analytical decisions and theoretical development.

Researcher reflexivity acknowledged the primary researcher's position as an educator and researcher with expertise in adult learning and cultural intelligence, bringing both insights and potential biases to the analysis. Regular debriefing sessions with colleagues provided critical perspectives and challenged emerging interpretations.

Findings

The analysis revealed five interconnected themes that illuminate how CQ manifests in Canadian professional contexts. These themes, presented through participant narratives and analytical synthesis, reveal CQ not as an abstract competency but as lived practice shaped by systemic forces, relational dynamics, and technological futures.

Theme 1: CQ as Embodied Practice—Moving Beyond Awareness to Action

"I interact with a unique sector of the community... When a client comes or is speaking to me on the phone, I first try to understand their way of life, which would actually guide the way that I respond to their questions, to their needs or their concerns, because that awareness of the cultural group I serve is really unique... I have to ensure that I am looking through their lenses."

(P2, Administrative Assistant)

This participant's reflection captures a fundamental finding: CQ in practice requires active perspective-taking that goes beyond cultural awareness to embodied engagement. Across interviews, participants consistently distinguished between knowing about cultural differences and actively adjusting their practice in response to those differences.

Beyond Awareness to Action

Participants described CQ as requiring conscious, deliberate action. A nurse manager (P1) illustrated this through her approach to patient care: "You need to come down to their level. Even though you feel you are educated, or you have some lot of things more than them, you need to follow up that and see their vulnerabilities, see their struggles, their traumas, and then relate to them in empathy and in mutual understanding." This "coming down" represents not

condescension but recognition of power differentials and the intentional work of creating equitable interactions.

Cultural Humility and Learning Stance

A college educator (P3) emphasized the importance of maintaining a learning stance: "Cultural intelligence isn't about having all the answers—it's about being curious enough to ask the right questions and humble enough to listen to the answers." This orientation toward continuous learning emerged as essential, particularly given the dynamic nature of cultural identities and expressions. Participants noted that assuming expertise based on past experiences with particular cultural groups often led to misunderstandings, as individual experiences within cultural groups vary significantly.

Navigating Cultural Tensions

Real-world CQ application often involves navigating tensions between different cultural expectations. An administrative assistant (P2) described managing situations where clients challenged her competence based on accent: "They are not being culturally aware. I am speaking English. They are also speaking English, but the accent sometimes can be an issue. So instead of me returning the energy to them, I would rather say, 'Okay, I am sorry,' and then I would enunciate my words clearly, trying to offer the solution they want."

This response demonstrates sophisticated CQ—recognizing the cultural dynamics at play, choosing not to escalate, and adapting communication style while maintaining professional dignity. Such moments reveal CQ as emotional labor that often goes unrecognized in organizational contexts.

Theme 2: Structural Barriers and Systemic Challenges

"There's a lot of people that don't want to see that change. They're scared. So they will not be as accommodating. They will not try to understand your perspective. And you know, some of them, they even make policies to ensure that that diversity doesn't come to the top." (P8, Business Professional)

While individual CQ capabilities are necessary, participants emphasized that systemic barriers often impede the translation of CQ into organizational change. These barriers operate at multiple levels, from institutional policies to resource allocation to deeply embedded cultural assumptions.

Institutional Inertia

Several participants described organizations that espouse diversity values but maintain structures that reinforce monocultural norms. A policy analyst (P10) observed: "We have diversity statements and inclusion policies, but when you look at who makes decisions, how meetings are run, what knowledge is valued—it's still very much reflecting one dominant culture." This disconnect between stated values and organizational practices creates what participants described as "diversity fatigue"—exhaustion from constantly advocating for genuine inclusion.

Resource Constraints

Developing organizational CQ requires investment in training, time for reflection, and support for experimental practices. An educator (P4) noted: "We're told to be culturally responsive, but we're not given time to learn about our students' cultures, to develop new materials, or to collaborate with community members. It's an add-on to an already impossible

workload." This lack of resource allocation reveals how CQ is often treated as optional rather than essential.

Policy-Practice Gaps

Participants identified significant gaps between policy intentions and implementation realities. A special education professional (P11) explained: "The policies say we should honor diverse ways of learning, but the assessment systems still privilege one particular way of demonstrating knowledge. How can we be culturally intelligent when the system itself isn't?" These systemic challenges suggest that developing CQ at the individual level, while necessary, is insufficient without corresponding organizational and policy changes.

Theme 3: CQ and Collective Well-being—Building Belonging and Psychological Safety

"When CQ is present, it builds a sense of belonging. Everyone feels welcome. If you feel comfortable around people, you already trust them to some extent. If you don't feel welcome, you don't trust them and don't feel safe."

(P11, Special Education Professional)

The connection between CQ and well-being emerged as a powerful theme, with participants describing how culturally intelligent practices directly impact psychological safety, trust, and collective flourishing.

Psychological Safety and Belonging

A nurse manager (P1) shared a transformative example from her healthcare setting: "We had a patient, a young Indigenous woman, who wasn't responding to treatment. Nothing was working. Then one of our Indigenous nurses suggested bringing in an Elder for a smudging ceremony. Some staff were skeptical, but we did it. The change was immediate—not just in the

patient, but in the whole unit. It was like everyone could breathe easier." This incident illustrates how CQ practices that honor diverse cultural approaches to healing create ripple effects throughout organizational systems, enhancing well-being for all involved.

Trust Building across Difference

Participants consistently linked CQ with trust development. An educator (P5) reflected: "When students see that you've made an effort to understand their cultural background—even if you make mistakes—it changes everything. They're more willing to take risks, to participate, to trust that you have their best interests at heart."

This trust-building function of CQ extends beyond individual relationships to organizational culture. When CQ is embedded in organizational practices, it creates what participants described as "cultural safety"—environments where diverse individuals can express their authentic selves without fear of discrimination or judgment.

Harm Reduction and Healing

Several participants explicitly connected CQ with harm reduction, particularly in contexts with histories of cultural trauma. A government administrator (P2) working with Indigenous communities observed: "Every interaction carries the weight of history—residential schools, systemic discrimination. CQ isn't just about being polite; it's about acknowledging harm and actively working not to perpetuate it."

This understanding of CQ as a tool for healing and reconciliation adds moral urgency to its development, particularly in Canadian contexts marked by colonial history and ongoing systemic inequities.

Theme 4: Leadership as Cultural Bridge-Building

"My manager, who's Caucasian, goes out of his way to ensure everyone feels valued. For Thanksgiving, instead of just doing the traditional thing, he made sure our African colleagues were featured in the celebration materials. It's these small acts that show real leadership." (P11, Special Education Professional)

Leadership emerged as a critical factor in translating individual CQ into organizational transformation. Participants described culturally intelligent leadership as fundamentally different from traditional leadership models, emphasizing vulnerability, distributed expertise, and the creation of inclusive spaces.

Vulnerable Leadership

Participants valued leaders who acknowledged their cultural limitations and demonstrated willingness to learn. A business professional (P9) described a pivotal moment: "Our CEO, in front of everyone, said 'I don't know how to pronounce your name correctly, but I want to learn. Can you teach me?' That vulnerability, that admission that the leader doesn't know everything—it changed our whole dynamic." This vulnerable approach to leadership creates permission for others to acknowledge their own learning needs, fostering a culture of continuous CQ development rather than performative diversity.

Distributed Cultural Expertise

Culturally intelligent leaders recognize and leverage distributed cultural expertise within their organizations. An educator (P6) explained: "Good leadership isn't about the leader knowing all cultures—it's about knowing who in your team has what cultural knowledge and creating structures where that knowledge is valued and shared."

This approach disrupts traditional hierarchies where cultural knowledge flows from designated "diversity experts" and instead recognizes all organizational members as potential sources of cultural insight.

Creating Inclusive Spaces

Leaders with high CQ actively create spaces where diverse cultural expressions can flourish. A special education professional (P11) described workplace potlucks where "everyone brings food from their culture, and it's not just about the food—it's about the stories, the connections, the recognition that we all bring something valuable."

These spaces go beyond superficial multiculturalism to create what participants called "brave spaces"—environments where difficult conversations about culture, power, and difference can occur productively.

Theme 5: Technology, AI, and Future Preparedness

"We're training people for jobs that will involve AI, but are we teaching them to recognize when AI is culturally biased? Are we preparing them to design systems that work for everyone, not just the dominant culture?"

(P7, Technology Educator)

Participants expressed both optimism and concern about the intersection of CQ with technological futures, particularly regarding artificial intelligence and digital transformation.

Cultural Bias in Systems

Several participants observed cultural biases embedded in technological systems. An administrative assistant (P2) who also works in business analysis noted: "The AI tools we use for

customer service—they're trained on certain types of language, certain communication styles. They don't understand the indirect communication styles that are normal in many cultures." This technological dimension of CQ requires not just awareness of bias but active skills in identifying and mitigating cultural assumptions built into systems.

Digital Equity Considerations

Participants highlighted how CQ must extend to understanding differential access to and comfort with technology across cultural groups. An educator (P4) observed: "During COVID, we assumed everyone could just shift online. But some of our families—especially newcomer families—didn't have the digital literacy, the devices, or the cultural framework for online learning. CQ means recognizing these differences and adapting, not just forcing everyone into the same digital box."

Preparing for AI-Mediated Futures

Looking forward, participants emphasized the need to prepare for futures where AI increasingly mediates intercultural interactions. A policy analyst (P10) reflected: "As government services become more automated, we need CQ to ensure these systems serve all citizens equitably. It's not enough to translate languages—we need systems that understand different cultural approaches to authority, privacy, family structure." This forward-looking perspective positions CQ as essential for navigating not just current diversity but future technological transformations that will reshape how cultures interact.

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal CQ as a complex, multifaceted competency that extends far beyond individual skills to encompass systemic transformation, relational dynamics,

and technological futures. This discussion explores the theoretical contributions, practical implications, and unique considerations for the Canadian context emerging from our analysis.

Theoretical Contributions

This study extends existing CQ theory in several significant ways. First, our findings challenge the predominantly cognitive and individualistic framing of CQ in the literature. While Earley and Ang's (2003) four-dimensional model remains valuable, our participants' experiences reveal CQ as fundamentally relational and embodied. The emphasis on "looking through their lenses" and "coming down to their level" suggests that CQ involves not just understanding cultural differences but actively repositioning oneself within power structures and relational dynamics.

Second, the study reveals the insufficiency of treating CQ as an individual competency divorced from systemic contexts. The theme of structural barriers highlights how organizational cultures, policies, and resource allocations can either enable or constrain CQ development. This finding aligns with Watkins and Noble's (2016) critique of superficial multiculturalism but extends it by documenting specific mechanisms through which institutional inertia perpetuates monocultural norms despite diversity rhetoric.

Third, our findings contribute to emerging scholarship on the intersection of CQ with well-being and psychological safety. While Simmons et al. (2019) established connections between leadership and educator well-being, our study demonstrates how CQ functions as a mediating mechanism, creating conditions for trust, belonging, and collective flourishing. The concept of "cultural safety" emerging from participants' narratives offers a valuable framework

for understanding CQ's role in harm reduction and healing, particularly relevant in contexts marked by historical trauma.

Fourth, the study breaks new theoretical ground in exploring CQ's intersection with artificial intelligence and technological futures. Participants' observations about cultural bias in AI systems and the need for culturally intelligent design extend CQ theory into digital domains largely absent from current literature. This technological dimension of CQ requires reconceptualizing it not just as human-to-human competency but as essential for human-AI interaction design.

Practical Implications

The findings generate specific, actionable implications for educators, leaders, and policymakers working to develop CQ in Canadian contexts.

For Educators: Pedagogical Strategies

Educators should move beyond "celebrating diversity" approaches to engage with CQ as critical practice. This involves:

- Creating learning experiences that require perspective-taking and cultural frame-shifting, not just knowledge acquisition about different cultures
- Incorporating critical examination of power structures and systemic barriers into CQ curriculum
- Developing assessment approaches that honor diverse ways of demonstrating knowledge and competency
- Integrating AI literacy with CQ development to prepare students for technologically mediated intercultural interactions

For Leaders: Implementation Framework

Leaders seeking to foster organizational CQ should focus on systemic rather than merely individual interventions:

- Model vulnerable leadership by acknowledging cultural learning needs and mistakes publicly
- Create formal structures for distributing and valuing cultural expertise across organizational hierarchies
- Allocate concrete resources (time, funding, support) for CQ development rather than treating it as an add-on
- Establish "brave spaces" for difficult conversations about culture, power, and difference
- Audit technological systems for cultural bias and involve diverse stakeholders in system design

For Policymakers: Systemic Recommendations

Policy interventions should address structural barriers identified in this study:

- Mandate CQ assessment and development in professional preparation programs across sectors
- Fund research on culturally intelligent AI design and establish standards for cultural inclusivity in automated systems
- Support community-based CQ initiatives that leverage local cultural knowledge
- Develop evaluation frameworks that measure systemic CQ outcomes, not just individual competencies

The Canadian Context: Unique Considerations

While CQ is globally relevant, the Canadian context presents unique considerations that emerged from our analysis. The intersection of Indigenous reconciliation with CQ adds layers of complexity not captured in frameworks developed in other national contexts. As participants noted, every intercultural interaction in Canada occurs on Indigenous land and within the context of ongoing colonialism. This reality demands that CQ in Canada explicitly engage with decolonization, moving beyond cultural sensitivity to active participation in reconciliation. Canada's official bilingualism creates another distinctive dimension. Participants described navigating not just ethnic and racial diversity but also the cultural differences between francophone and anglophone communities. This linguistic duality, combined with Indigenous language revitalization efforts, positions language as a central component of Canadian CQ in ways that may differ from other multicultural nations.

The regional variations within Canada—from urban centers with super-diverse populations to rural communities with different demographic profiles—require CQ frameworks flexible enough to accommodate varied contexts while maintaining coherent principles. Participants from different regions described vastly different challenges and opportunities for CQ development, suggesting that one-size-fits-all approaches will likely fail.

Finally, Canada's immigration policies and demographic projections create a unique urgency around CQ development. The 2041 projections that frame this study are not abstract futures but imminent realities already manifesting in many communities. This demographic transformation, occurring more rapidly than in many other nations, positions CQ as what participants termed a "survival competency"—essential for social cohesion and collective prosperity.

Future Directions

This study opens several avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies tracking CQ development over time would illuminate how competencies evolve and what interventions prove most effective. Comparative research across different Canadian regions could identify context-specific strategies while building toward national frameworks.

The intersection of CQ with AI demands urgent attention. Research should explore how to design culturally intelligent AI systems, how to prepare professionals for AI-mediated intercultural interactions, and how to ensure technological transformation doesn't exacerbate cultural inequities. This includes developing new assessment tools that can evaluate both human and systemic CQ.

Future studies should also examine CQ development in specific sectors—healthcare, education, technology, government—to understand sector-specific challenges and opportunities. Particularly important is research with Indigenous communities to ensure CQ frameworks align with Indigenous ways of knowing and being rather than imposing Western constructs.

Finally, intervention research testing specific CQ development strategies would provide evidence for best practices. This includes examining different training approaches, organizational change strategies, and policy interventions to identify what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting findings. The sample size of 11 participants, while appropriate for in-depth qualitative analysis, limits generalizability. Participants were self-selected and likely represent individuals already engaged

with CQ concepts, potentially missing perspectives from those resistant to or unaware of CQ importance.

Geographic concentration in urban centers means rural and remote perspectives are underrepresented, significant given Canada's geographic diversity. The 30-minute interview format, while enabling broad participation, constrained depth of exploration for some topics. Longer or multiple interviews might have yielded richer narratives.

The study's timing during ongoing pandemic recovery may have influenced participants' perspectives, particularly regarding technology and remote work. Researcher positionality as an educator and CQ advocate may have influenced interpretation despite reflexive practices. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot rather than developmental trajectories of CQ.

Conclusion

As Canada approaches its 2041 demographic milestone, the imperative for Cultural Intelligence transcends academic interest to become a matter of societal urgency. This study's findings reveal CQ not as a luxury competency for cosmopolitan elites but as foundational capability essential for collective survival and flourishing in an irreversibly diverse future. The voices of practitioners in this study illuminate both the promise and challenges of developing CQ in real-world contexts. Their experiences reveal CQ as embodied practice requiring not just individual skill development but systemic transformation. The structural barriers they identify—institutional inertia, resource constraints, policy-practice gaps—demand coordinated responses across educational, organizational, and policy domains.

Perhaps most significantly, this study reframes CQ from instrumental competency to moral imperative. In contexts marked by historical trauma and ongoing inequities, CQ emerges as a tool for healing, for building trust across difference, and for creating conditions where all individuals can contribute their full potential. The connection between CQ and collective well-being suggests that our capacity to navigate cultural diversity directly impacts our ability to create psychologically safe, innovative, and resilient communities.

The technological dimension adds urgency to this imperative. As AI systems increasingly mediate our interactions, the need for culturally intelligent design becomes critical. Without deliberate attention to CQ in technological development, we risk encoding and amplifying cultural biases at unprecedented scales.

The path forward requires courage—courage to acknowledge what we don't know, to confront uncomfortable truths about power and privilege, and to imagine new ways of being together. It requires moving beyond tolerance to genuine engagement, beyond diversity statements to structural change, beyond individual competency to collective transformation. As one participant powerfully stated, the demographic transformation ahead might seem "scary" to some, but it also represents unprecedented opportunity. The choice before us is clear: develop CQ as a core survival competency or risk fragmenting into cultural silos that diminish us all. This study suggests that with intentional effort, systemic support, and commitment to continuous learning, we can choose the former—creating a future where cultural diversity becomes our greatest strength rather than our deepest divide.

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Oladunni Tola-Adewumi is a K–12 teacher and researcher based in Three Hills, Alberta. She holds an Alberta Teaching Certificate, earned after completing additional credentialing courses at Athabasca University. She has a Master of Arts in Education and an MBA, with international research training across three continents through programs such as ERASMUS+ at the University of Padua (Italy), Julius-Maximilians University Würzburg (Germany), and the Quantic School of Business and Technology in Washington, D.C. Her work focuses on adult learning, cultural intelligence, and community empowerment. Her submitted paper explores how Cultural Intelligence can support inclusion, reduce bias, and foster belonging in Canada's diverse educational and workplace communities. A fun tidbit: she loves connecting global perspectives to local classrooms and communities.
