
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultivating unofficial cultural diplomats among Moroccan students: Bridging cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy

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| ABSTRACT

This paper explores the untapped potential of Moroccan students as agents of unofficial cultural diplomacy within the framework of critical pedagogy. Drawing on critical pedagogy's master concepts such as "critical consciousness," "empowerment," "dialogue," and "praxis," this paper advocates for reimagining cultural diplomacy as an educational and transformative endeavor. It argues that Moroccan students, equipped with critical awareness, can foster global understanding and challenge hegemonic cultural narratives. Practical recommendations are provided to integrate critical pedagogy into educational and cultural diplomacy policies.

| KEYWORDS

Track II diplomacy, cultural ambassadors, Moroccan students, cultural diplomacy, soft power, critical pedagogy

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

"Why do Moroccans always serve couscous in one large dish for everyone to share?" a Dutch student once asked Salma, a Moroccan engineering student studying in Amsterdam. Salma hesitated, unsure how to respond to what felt like a simple yet loaded question. She realized that this was not just about couscous—it was about explaining Morocco's culture of hospitality, its tradition of communal eating, and the deep value placed on sharing meals as a way to strengthen bonds. Over time, Salma came to embrace her role as an unofficial cultural ambassador, using every question as an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue about her homeland.

This exchange illustrates a much larger potential: the ability of Moroccan students abroad to serve as bridges between cultures, fostering understanding and breaking down stereotypes. While Morocco's cultural diplomacy efforts focus heavily on institutional strategies led by the monarchy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Wainscott, 2017; Dines, 2020), they often overlook the grassroots potential of Moroccan students to be potential cultural ambassadors (Laalou & El Bakkali El Hassani, 2024).

This paper identifies a critical gap in Morocco's current cultural diplomacy strategy: the persistent over-reliance on state-led (Track I) initiatives, which limits the involvement of non-state actors such as students, educators, and civil society organizations. Despite the growing global relevance of Track II diplomacy, Moroccan cultural diplomacy remains centralized and institutionally rigid, often sidelining grassroots efforts and informal cultural representation. As a result, the transformative potential of Moroccan students to serve as proactive cultural ambassadors remains largely untapped. This gap reflects a broader conceptual limitation, where cultural diplomacy is still viewed as the exclusive domain of official diplomats rather than as a collaborative, educational, and people-driven practice.

To address this issue, this conceptual and theoretical paper pursues two key objectives. The first is to identify and examine the shortcomings of Morocco's official cultural diplomacy. The second is to propose an alternative framework and recommend strategies aimed at improving Morocco's cultural diplomacy efforts and boosting its soft power globally. What

makes this paper particularly compelling is that it not only brings cultural diplomacy into the concerns of educational practitioners but also explores its practice from a nonconventional and underexplored perspective—the perspective of critical pedagogy.

More specifically, this paper seeks to establish a bridge between cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy, two seemingly distant disciplines, by theorizing about the relevance of some master concepts in critical pedagogy such as “critical consciousness,” “empowerment,” “dialogue,” and “praxis,” to cultural diplomacy practice. Also, the paper seeks to push the boundaries of the discourse on cultural diplomacy by shifting it away from the narrow conception of being a “political business” exclusively managed by politicians to be a collaborative endeavor involving teachers and students.

In this paper, we contend that official cultural diplomacy, known as Track I diplomacy¹, cannot operate effectively in isolation. It needs to be supplemented by additional approaches. The complexity of the modern world makes it impossible to manage global issues with a single method or perspective. Similarly, no individual or institution can fully comprehend the multifaceted nature of truth. Addressing today’s political and cultural challenges requires blending Track I diplomacy (official efforts) with Track II diplomacy² (unofficial initiatives), making their collaboration indispensable (Chataway, 1998: 272).

We argue that Morocco’s cultural diplomacy is primarily driven by political objectives and supported by institutional structures. The state heavily relies on key political entities, especially the monarchy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to assert not only its cultural presence but also its strategic political positionality and ideological orientation on the global stage (Laalou & El Bakkali El Hassani, 2024). This approach reflects a deliberate projection of Morocco’s vision of moderation, stability, and leadership within regional and international contexts, reinforcing narratives aligned with its domestic and foreign policy agendas. Nonetheless, this traditional, state-led paradigm increasingly coexists with emerging non-state actors — particularly in sports and the culinary arts — who significantly enhance Morocco’s cultural visibility and soft power at the global level. The achievements of Moroccan athletes and the internationalization of Moroccan gastronomy, for instance, have positioned the country in global cultural networks in ways that complement and sometimes transcend official diplomatic efforts (Wainscott, 2017; Dines, 2020).

In an increasingly interconnected world, fostering cultural understanding through education has become a crucial aspect of global engagement. While Morocco’s official cultural diplomacy efforts primarily operate through state-led initiatives, the potential of Moroccan students as unofficial cultural ambassadors remains underexplored. This paper proposes integrating cultural diplomacy principles with critical pedagogy (Freire, 2002 [1970]) into Moroccan curricula to prepare students for global cultural engagement. Critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on empowerment, reflexivity, and transformative education (Freire, 2002 [1970]; Diemer & Blustein, 2006), provides a compelling framework to rethink the role of Moroccan students as unofficial cultural diplomats. By equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and critical awareness needed for cross-cultural communication, Moroccan students can serve as informal cultural diplomats, fostering mutual understanding and enhancing their country’s soft power on the global stage.

This leads to the central question of this research paper: ***“How can integrating cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy principles into Moroccan curricula prepare students to become unofficial cultural ambassadors of Morocco?”***

To address this central research question adequately, the following ancillary questions are also explored:

- 1. What key elements of cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy are most relevant for fostering cultural ambassadorship in Moroccan students?***
- 2. How can Moroccan curricula be adapted to include experiential learning that enhances students’ cultural diplomacy skills?***
- 3. What measurable impacts can be expected from embedding cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy in educational programs aimed at global cultural engagement?***

These ancillary questions frame the inquiry into actionable, theoretically grounded directions, ensuring that the study bridges conceptual frameworks and practical applications. They illuminate how cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy intersect in shaping students’ identities, competencies, and agency as informal cultural ambassadors. Addressing these questions allows the research to assess not just the theoretical compatibility of these paradigms but also their pedagogical viability and measurable impact. In doing so, the paper contributes to rethinking Morocco’s cultural diplomacy as an inclusive, education-driven endeavor, where students emerge as empowered, critically conscious actors capable of advancing intercultural dialogue and enhancing Morocco’s soft power through authentic, grassroots engagement.

2. Cultural Diplomacy Framework

2.1. Track I Diplomacy vs. Track II Diplomacy

Diplomatic engagement extends beyond government officials and institutions, encompassing both formal and informal actors. While state-led cultural diplomacy, or Track I diplomacy, has long been considered the cornerstone of international cultural relations, unofficial cultural diplomacy, or Track II diplomacy, has emerged as an equally significant approach. Understanding the

¹ The concept of “Track I diplomacy” will be discussed in detail in section 2.1

² The concept of “Track II diplomacy” will be discussed in detail in section 2.1

interplay between these two tracks can help strengthen a nation's global influence by fostering deeper and more diverse cultural ties.

Track II diplomacy operates outside governmental structures, relying on non-state actors such as individuals, civil society organizations, and academic institutions to promote cultural understanding (Butcher, 2012). Davidson and Montville (1981) describe Track II diplomacy as "non-official, unstructured interaction" driven by openness, flexibility, and often altruistic motives (Davidson & Montville, 1981 pp. 155–156). By engaging citizens directly, Track II diplomacy humanizes international relations, encouraging cultural dialogue through personal stories and lived experiences.

Unofficial cultural diplomacy thrives on mutual benefit, fostering trust, respect, and shared cultural experiences rather than advancing specific political agendas. Its apolitical nature enables more meaningful exchanges across cultural boundaries. For example, Nerva Biltekin (2020) highlights how Swedish women in the U.S. supported Sweden's cultural diplomacy by creating the Swedish Women's Educational Organization (SWEA). Through cultural events and funding for projects promoting Swedish heritage, these women became informal diplomats, reshaping Sweden's cultural narrative abroad (Biltekin, 2020 p. 1).

Similarly, Moroccan students, inside or outside Morocco, have untapped potential to act as informal cultural ambassadors. Through everyday interactions, they can communicate their country's cultural values more authentically than official campaigns. By supporting these students, Morocco could broaden its cultural reach while complementing state-led diplomatic efforts.

2.2. Preparing Moroccan Students as Unofficial Diplomats

In a rapidly globalizing world, preparing Moroccan students to become unofficial cultural ambassadors should begin in high schools. Education systems have the unique potential to cultivate globally-aware citizens capable of representing their country's culture, values, and identity. This vision aligns with the principles of critical pedagogy, which advocates for transformative learning that empowers students to become active agents in shaping social and cultural realities (Freire, 2002 [1970]).

Critical pedagogy, as championed by Paulo Freire (2002 [1970]), emphasizes the development of critical consciousness (*conscientização*) through participatory and dialogic education. Students are encouraged to question societal norms, reflect on their cultural heritage, and understand global power dynamics. This reflective process not only nurtures cultural awareness but also prepares students to communicate Morocco's rich cultural narrative when studying or working abroad.

Moroccan schools could integrate critical pedagogy-based programs aimed at fostering intercultural communication, cultural literacy, and global citizenship. These programs would help students develop the confidence, knowledge, and intercultural sensitivity required to function as unofficial diplomats in diverse cultural settings. For example, curriculum modules on Moroccan history, literature, and arts could be taught through critical inquiry, enabling students to explore and articulate their cultural identity with depth and confidence.

Moreover, students could engage in experiential learning activities such as intercultural projects (Lee, Ho, & Chen, 2023), cultural festivals, and international exchange simulations. These initiatives would allow them to practice cultural storytelling, conflict resolution, and cross-cultural negotiation—skills vital for informal diplomacy. Emphasizing project-based learning, debate forums, and collaborative research on global issues would further enhance their ability to present and defend their cultural perspectives while respecting cultural differences.

Importantly, language education should play a central role in this endeavor. Multilingual proficiency would enable Moroccan students to access and engage with global audiences more effectively. Equipping students with linguistic and cultural fluency—that is, the ability to navigate, interpret, and communicate effectively across different cultural contexts—would allow them to embody Morocco's cultural identity while establishing meaningful international relationships.

By embedding the principles of critical pedagogy into the Moroccan education system, schools could nurture a new generation of culturally competent individuals. These students would be well-prepared to become proactive cultural ambassadors, promoting Morocco's heritage and values through authentic, people-to-people diplomacy. This educational vision positions Moroccan students not merely as passive recipients of cultural knowledge but as dynamic, unofficial diplomats capable of advancing Morocco's global standing in a connected world.

While this paper emphasizes the transformative potential of integrating critical pedagogy and cultural diplomacy into the Moroccan curriculum, it is important to clarify that the proposed educational model is best suited for high school students and beyond. At this stage, students generally possess the cognitive maturity, emotional awareness, and foundational knowledge in subjects such as geography, history, and culture necessary for engaging meaningfully with global audiences. They are also more likely to have developed critical thinking skills and the capacity for abstract reasoning, which are essential for reflecting on cultural narratives, navigating intercultural dynamics, and embodying the role of unofficial cultural ambassadors. Expecting younger students to assume such roles prematurely risks oversimplifying the demands of cultural representation and may undermine the model's efficacy.

2.3. Challenges in Morocco's Diplomatic Strategy

Despite the potential of Track II diplomacy, Morocco's cultural diplomacy strategy remains predominantly state driven. This over-reliance on official diplomacy reflects a limited view of diplomacy itself. Chataway (1998) notes that state officials often view citizens' diplomatic involvement as meddling, considering them "the enemy" or troublesome "meddlers" (Chataway, 1998 p.

271). Concerns about potential risks—such as security threats, obstructed negotiations, or reduced diplomatic control—have contributed to sidelining non-state actors in Morocco's diplomatic framework (Chataway, 1998 p. 271).

However, excluding citizens from diplomatic engagement overlooks their potential as cultural intermediaries. Morocco could mitigate such concerns by adopting a more inclusive diplomatic model that balances state control with citizen-driven initiatives. This approach would transform ordinary citizens from passive cultural subjects into active agents of Morocco's soft power.

Given that cultural diplomacy inherently embodies soft power, Morocco's strategy could benefit from adopting "smart power." Nye (2004) defines smart power as "the ability to blend hard and soft resources effectively according to a specific foreign strategy" (Nye 2004, cited in Zamorano, 2016 p. 175). By integrating Track II diplomacy into its existing state-led framework, Morocco could optimize its cultural influence on the global stage.

Smart power suggests a multi-layered approach where government-led initiatives and citizen-driven efforts work together. Moroccan cultural diplomacy should not solely depend on official cultural attachés or state-funded programs. Instead, empowering non-state actors, particularly Moroccan students, could create a more agile, cost-effective, and wide-reaching diplomatic network.

2.4. Bridging the Two Tracks for Global Impact

Official cultural diplomacy, or Track I diplomacy, remains essential for projecting a country's image through organized programs such as cultural exhibitions, performances, educational exchanges, and media campaigns (Cumplings, 2003 p.1). However, Track I diplomacy's top-down approach limits its reach and impact. Its structured nature often fails to capture the dynamic and evolving narratives that unofficial efforts can provide.

By contrast, Track II diplomacy adds a more personal, community-driven dimension. Cultural exchanges led by non-state actors, such as academic programs, international festivals, youth initiatives, and online cultural platforms, strengthen bilateral ties by fostering cross-cultural understanding through mutual engagement (Akli, 2012 p. 40).

To enhance its cultural diplomacy, Morocco should adopt a hybrid strategy that combines both Track I and Track II approaches. This integrated model would allow the government to maintain diplomatic oversight while leveraging the creative, adaptive potential of grassroots cultural initiatives. By bridging official and unofficial diplomacy, Morocco can transform its cultural diplomacy into a comprehensive and sustainable endeavor that resonates globally.

3. Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Diplomacy

Critical pedagogy, as conceptualized by Paulo Freire (2002 [1970]), challenges traditional hierarchies by emphasizing dialogic learning, reflexivity, and praxis—action informed by reflection. It views education as a practice for liberating, empowering, and equipping students with the necessary tools to question and transform the world around them.

In the context of cultural diplomacy, critical pedagogy aligns with the goal of fostering mutual understanding. Unlike traditional approaches that often treat cultural ambassadors as passive representatives, critical pedagogy envisions them as active participants in shaping cultural narratives. By empowering Moroccan students with critical awareness and dialogic skills, they can co-create authentic, inclusive representations of their country abroad.

3.1. Integrating Empowerment and Critical Consciousness in Cultural Diplomacy Education

To cultivate Moroccan students as unofficial cultural ambassadors, it is essential to integrate the intertwined frameworks of *empowerment* and *critical consciousness* into educational curricula. Empowerment, as conceptualized in social and community psychology, involves fostering cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacities that enable individuals to navigate social structures and enact change (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016). Similarly, *critical consciousness*, rooted in Paulo Freire's (2002 [1970]) educational philosophy, emphasizes developing awareness of societal injustices through critical reflection, political efficacy, and transformative action.

Education guided by these frameworks can transform Moroccan students into proactive cultural diplomats. Empowerment, in this context, extends beyond acquiring knowledge; it involves developing students' ability to act as agents of change who authentically and critically weave Morocco's cultural narratives. Psychological empowerment encompasses cognitive skills like cultural knowledge, emotional skills like confidence in representing one's heritage, and behavioral skills like engaging in intercultural dialogue.

Critical consciousness (or *conscientização*) complements this by fostering reflective thinking and active engagement. Through critical reflection, students could analyze stereotypes, power imbalances, and cultural narratives shaping global perceptions of Morocco. Political efficacy would enable them to believe in their ability to influence cultural understanding, while critical action would translate their cultural awareness into meaningful representation in international settings.

The concept of critical consciousness provides a compelling framework for reimagining cultural diplomacy in educational contexts (Diemer & Blustein, 2006). Critical consciousness, which encompasses the ability to recognize and challenge sociopolitical barriers, aligns with the goal of empowering Moroccan students to serve as informal cultural ambassadors. By fostering critical awareness, Moroccan educational programs can prepare students to navigate global cultural landscapes and contribute to international dialogue, advancing Morocco's cultural diplomacy objectives beyond the limitations of state-led initiatives.

Central to critical consciousness is sociopolitical analysis—the ability to critically examine structural inequities and power dynamics. This skill is integral to cultural diplomacy, where students must engage with and reinterpret dominant global narratives about Morocco. Embedding critical pedagogy into Moroccan curricula could cultivate this analytical capacity, which enables students to articulate their cultural identity in ways that challenge stereotypes and promote a more nuanced understanding of Moroccan culture. Such efforts align with the educational strategies proposed in this paper; strategies which make students co-producers of cultural narratives rather than passive representatives.

In addition to that, the concept of sociopolitical control, another dimension of critical consciousness, complements the empowerment framework proposed in this paper. Sociopolitical control “refers to beliefs that actions in the social and political system can lead to desired outcomes” (Zimmerman, Ramírez-Valles, & Maton, 1999, p. 736). Sociopolitical control, as we see it, reflects an individual’s belief in their ability to bring about change within societal structures, a quality that is equally crucial for students engaged in cultural diplomacy. Therefore, as far as critical pedagogy and cultural diplomacy are concerned, experiential learning activities, such as cultural exchange programs, storytelling workshops, and global issue debates, could foster this sense of agency. By developing confidence and practical skills, Moroccan students would be better equipped to navigate cross-cultural interactions and advocate for their heritage with authenticity and poise.

The integration of critical consciousness into educational practices highlights the transformative potential of a reflective and action-oriented approach to cultural diplomacy. Both critical consciousness and the framework proposed in this paper emphasize the empowerment of marginalized groups to transcend structural constraints. By equipping students with the skills to analyze and act upon global cultural dynamics, Moroccan educational initiatives could position students as proactive cultural diplomats. These efforts would not only enhance Morocco’s soft power but also contribute to fostering equitable cultural dialogue and mutual understanding on an international scale.

Embedding these principles into the Moroccan curriculum requires a reimagining of educational practices. Culturally-relevant content, such as Moroccan history, literature, and arts, should be taught through a critical lens that highlights cultural dynamics and socio-political contexts. For example, analyzing how Moroccan artistic expressions have historically responded to colonial narratives could deepen students’ understanding of cultural resilience and global representation.

Experiential learning activities, including cultural storytelling workshops, intercultural simulations, and global issue debates, can enhance students’ ability to present Moroccan culture thoughtfully and confidently. By engaging in authentic and real-life simulations, students could practice conflict resolution, cultural negotiation, and intercultural advocacy, gaining the practical skills required for informal diplomacy.

Additionally, fostering relational empowerment through collaborative projects can strengthen students’ interpersonal competencies. International exchange programs, cultural events, and joint research initiatives would encourage students to build cross-cultural networks. These relationships could serve as long-term diplomatic channels, promoting sustained cultural engagement.

Language education must also be prioritized, as multilingual proficiency is essential for effective cultural diplomacy. Courses in world languages should integrate cultural immersion experiences to develop both linguistic and cultural fluency. This would ensure Moroccan students’ potential engagement with global audiences while articulating their cultural identity authentically and persuasively.

By applying empowerment and critical consciousness as guiding frameworks, Moroccan educational institutions can nurture a generation of cultural ambassadors who are not only aware of their heritage but also prepared to engage meaningfully in the global cultural landscape. These students would transcend the passive role of cultural informants, becoming dynamic cultural diplomats capable of reshaping Morocco’s global image through people-centered diplomacy.

3.2. Conscientização and Soft Power

Joseph Nye’s (2003; 2004) concept of soft power, which emphasizes the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, resonates profoundly with Paulo Freire’s (2002 [1970]) idea of critical consciousness (*conscientização*) from critical pedagogy. Both concepts share a reliance on relational influence and transformative engagement, in view of creating meaningful change through non-coercive methods. Soft power draws its strength from cultural appeal, shared values, and intellectual influence, while critical pedagogy empowers individuals to recognize and challenge sociopolitical barriers through education and reflection.

At the core of both frameworks lies the transformative potential of dialogue and agency. Nye’s (2003; 2004) soft power thrives on fostering mutual understanding and attraction through cultural and intellectual engagement. Similarly, Freire’s critical pedagogy emphasizes dialogic education (Kaufmann, 2010), where transformation is achieved through meaningful conversations that respect the autonomy and agency of all participants. This dialogic approach mirrors soft power’s ability to build cooperative relationships and reshape perceptions by appealing to shared ideals and values. In both cases, influence is not imposed but cultivated through mutual respect and participatory engagement.

Another critical parallel lies in the empowerment of individuals as agents of change. Soft power operates through cultural ambassadors—artists, educators, and students—who personify and communicate their nation’s values on a global stage. Critical pedagogy, too, seeks to empower learners to become active agents capable of challenging and transforming oppressive systems. By fostering a sense of sociopolitical control and critical awareness, individuals equipped with Freire’s (2002 [1970])

critical consciousness can influence their environments in ways that align with Nye's (2003; 2004) vision of soft power: creating attraction and fostering alignment through voluntary and authentic engagement.

Both soft power and critical pedagogy share a transformative goal of reshaping perceptions and relationships. Freire's emphasis on critical reflection and action offers a robust framework for developing individuals who can engage in cultural diplomacy with intentionality and depth. When applied to Moroccan students, this synergy becomes particularly evident. Through an educational framework that integrates critical pedagogy, students can embody soft power by representing their country's culture and values with confidence and critical awareness. They become not just passive cultural informants but dynamic cultural ambassadors capable of challenging stereotypes and reshaping global narratives about Morocco.

In essence, the interplay between soft power and critical consciousness highlights the power of relational, value-driven influence. Both frameworks underscore the importance of fostering agency, dialogue, and cultural authenticity to achieve meaningful change. Integrating these principles into Moroccan educational practices would not only enhance the country's cultural diplomacy but also prepare students to navigate and influence global cultural landscapes effectively, advancing Morocco's soft power on the international stage.

3.3. Empowerment Framework for Cultural Diplomacy

Integrating an empowerment framework is essential to cultivating Moroccan students as unofficial cultural diplomats. This framework can be conceptualized through four interconnected types of empowerment—*behavioral*, *emotional*, *cognitive*, and *relational*—which align with the critical pedagogy principles advocated in this paper (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016; Christens, 2012; Zimmerman, 1995). Each type plays a specific role in transforming Moroccan students from passive cultural subjects into proactive cultural ambassadors.

3.3.1. Behavioral Empowerment and Cultural Diplomacy

Behavioral empowerment emphasizes action-oriented engagement, mirroring the participatory nature of cultural diplomacy (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016). Moroccan students can be empowered to participate in intercultural projects, organize cultural festivals, and engage in debates on global issues. These activities help students embody Morocco's cultural narrative through lived experiences, demonstrating the active role they can play in informal cultural diplomacy. Salma's cultural exchange experience, shared earlier in the introduction of this paper, exemplifies how everyday encounters can become diplomatic acts through meaningful engagement.

From a critical pedagogy perspective, this form of empowerment involves fostering students' capacity for critical reflection and transformative action within their cultural and social environments. Moroccan students, when equipped with critical awareness of their cultural heritage and the socio-political dynamics shaping their global identity, can become active agents in cultural diplomacy.

Critical pedagogy advocates for an education that goes beyond passive knowledge transmission (Freire, 2002 [1970]). By integrating experiential learning practices such as cultural immersion projects, Moroccan students can be trained to critically evaluate cultural narratives and reshape them into compelling stories that resonate internationally. Their involvement in structured cultural exchange programs, supported by reflective activities such as journals or public presentations, could transform these experiences into impactful diplomatic interactions.

Salma's cultural exchange experience illustrates how everyday encounters can become diplomatic acts through meaningful engagement. For instance, by discussing Morocco's traditions with foreign peers or participating in international competitions, students unconsciously perform cultural diplomacy. This aligns with Paulo Freire's (2002 [1970]) notion of praxis, where critical reflection and action merge to produce informed and empowered social actors capable of transformative societal contributions.

Behavioral empowerment, in this sense, prepares Moroccan students to be unofficial cultural ambassadors, capable of navigating and reshaping global narratives. By learning to articulate their cultural identity through participatory and reflective engagements, they can challenge misconceptions and foster mutual understanding, embodying Morocco's cultural narrative in authentic, dynamic ways.

3.3.2. Emotional Empowerment and Cultural Identity

Emotional empowerment involves fostering confidence and belief in one's capacity to influence societal narratives (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016). Developing Moroccan students' emotional empowerment ensures they feel confident when representing their cultural heritage in international settings. Through critical pedagogy-based educational programs, students can be trained to see themselves as capable cultural agents who counter stereotypes while proudly sharing Morocco's cultural richness.

From a critical pedagogy perspective, emotional empowerment is not merely about self-esteem but also about nurturing a critical sense of agency. It requires helping Moroccan students develop emotional resilience, cultural pride, and self-awareness in representing their heritage on international platforms.

Through culturally responsive education grounded in critical pedagogy, students can develop a deeper understanding of their cultural identity while learning how to articulate it in diverse contexts. This process involves cultivating emotional intelligence through reflective practices like storytelling, cultural narrative writing, and intercultural dialogue workshops. When students explore their heritage critically and expressively, they build confidence in navigating cultural complexities while engaging in authentic representation.

Critical pedagogy challenges the traditional notion of cultural representation by positioning students as co-producers of cultural knowledge rather than passive receivers (Freire, 2002 [1970]). Moroccan students can be empowered through projects that encourage them to reclaim and reinterpret cultural symbols, practices, and stories. This process allows them to resist cultural stereotypes and reshape international perceptions of Morocco. By participating in intercultural exchanges, they can narrate their lived experiences, humanize their cultural narratives, and dispel misconceptions rooted in colonial or orientalist frameworks. Students could, for example, create digital storytelling projects, cultural blogs, or podcasts that showcase Morocco's cultural diversity from their perspectives. Such initiatives enhance their ability to engage emotionally with an international audience while asserting their cultural identity with authenticity and pride. Classroom practices like role-playing cultural ambassadors or participating in international cultural simulations can further reinforce emotional empowerment by providing real-world contexts for self-expression and cultural advocacy.

Emotional empowerment, in this sense, aligns with Paulo Freire's (2002 [1970]) notion of "conscientização" (critical consciousness), where students become aware of cultural hegemonies and learn how to challenge them through emotionally intelligent and culturally sensitive communication. When students see themselves as capable of influencing cultural narratives, they become proactive cultural ambassadors, sharing Morocco's heritage not out of obligation but from a place of genuine pride and emotional investment.

3.3.3. Cognitive Empowerment and Critical Pedagogy

Cognitive empowerment aligns closely with critical pedagogy's emphasis on reflective and analytical thinking (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016). By fostering critical thinking about cultural narratives, social power dynamics, and historical contexts, Moroccan students can better understand the socio-political forces shaping global perceptions of their country. This understanding equips them with the intellectual tools needed to challenge cultural stereotypes and offer a well-informed representation of Morocco on the international stage.

Cognitive empowerment involves fostering students' ability to critically analyze cultural narratives, social power structures, and historical contexts that shape global perceptions of their country. By developing cognitive empowerment, Moroccan students gain the intellectual tools necessary to deconstruct stereotypes, challenge cultural biases, and engage in well-informed cultural representation on the international stage.

From a critical pedagogy perspective, cognitive empowerment requires more than acquiring factual knowledge about Moroccan history, culture, and global affairs. It involves teaching students how to question dominant narratives, analyze ideological constructions, and recognize power asymmetries embedded in cross-cultural representations. This critical engagement can be achieved through dialogic learning practices such as debates, problem-based learning, and case studies on media portrayals of Morocco in global contexts.

Educational initiatives grounded in critical pedagogy can integrate project-based learning tasks where students explore cultural narratives in historical, social, and geopolitical contexts. For instance, analyzing global media coverage of Moroccan culture can help students identify orientalist tropes and learn how such representations affect international perceptions. By developing research projects that explore Moroccan heritage through comparative and historical lenses, students can produce alternative narratives that highlight Morocco's cultural complexity.

Additionally, fostering interdisciplinary learning through subjects such as history, sociology, and cultural studies can deepen students' critical consciousness. Critical discussions on postcolonial theory, cultural diplomacy, and global communication can enhance their ability to critique reductionist portrayals and advocate for nuanced understandings of Moroccan culture. This cognitive development supports Paulo Freire's (2002 [1970]) vision of education as a practice of freedom, where students become active knowledge producers capable of transformative societal contributions. For example, Moroccan students could engage in model cultural diplomacy conferences or international exchange simulations, where they apply their critical knowledge to real-world cultural scenarios. Through such experiences, they can present well-informed, analytically sound representations of Moroccan culture, grounded in historical accuracy and critical insight. This cognitive empowerment ensures that their cultural advocacy goes beyond surface-level representation, reflecting an in-depth understanding of cultural diplomacy's complexities.

In this way, cognitive empowerment not only enhances students' intellectual engagement but also prepares them to become critical cultural ambassadors. Their ability to think reflectively and analytically positions them as capable negotiators of cultural meaning, ready to participate meaningfully in international cultural dialogues while reshaping global perceptions of Morocco.

3.3.4. Relational Empowerment and Global Engagement

Relational empowerment emphasizes the development of meaningful, cross-cultural relationships through collaboration and dialogue (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016). Moroccan students can cultivate international networks through exchange programs, collaborative research projects, and cultural storytelling initiatives. These sustained global relationships enhance Morocco's cultural reach, positioning students as long-term cultural intermediaries, fostering mutual understanding and lasting cultural ties.

From a critical pedagogy perspective, relational empowerment involves fostering students' capacity to engage in respectful intercultural communication while recognizing and navigating cultural differences with sensitivity and openness. It emphasizes reciprocal learning, where students become both cultural learners and cultural representatives in global contexts.

Moroccan students can cultivate international networks through exchange programs, collaborative research projects, cultural storytelling initiatives, and digital cultural diplomacy platforms. These sustained global relationships extend Morocco's cultural reach while positioning students as long-term cultural intermediaries capable of fostering mutual understanding and lasting cultural ties.

Critical pedagogy encourages relational empowerment by promoting dialogic learning environments where students engage in cross-cultural conversations with peers from diverse backgrounds (Kaufmann). Dialogic encounters—whether in-person or virtual—allow students to explore and articulate their cultural identities while listening to and learning from others. This reciprocal process helps break down cultural stereotypes and build bridges of understanding, essential components of informal cultural diplomacy. For instance, exchange programs involving intercultural service-learning projects can immerse students in culturally diverse environments, enabling them to practice relational diplomacy firsthand (Bettie, 2020). Similarly, collaborative research initiatives involving international teams can allow students to co-create knowledge while navigating cultural differences through respectful dialogue. Projects like cultural blogging, global webinars, and international cultural forums can also serve as platforms for building transnational relationships rooted in shared learning experiences.

Relational empowerment, as framed by critical pedagogy, is not about creating one-sided representations of culture but fostering mutual respect and co-authorship of cultural narratives. Moroccan students, when encouraged to participate in cultural storytelling initiatives like digital archives, personal narratives, and cultural heritage documentaries, become active agents in shaping global perceptions of Morocco. This participatory process shifts cultural diplomacy from being state-centered to people-driven, emphasizing grassroots-level intercultural exchanges.

Moreover, by learning to negotiate cultural meanings in different contexts, students develop essential diplomatic skills such as cultural sensitivity, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. These qualities prepare them to serve as cultural connectors, capable of nurturing enduring intercultural partnerships. Critical pedagogy's emphasis on relational learning ensures that students engage in cultural advocacy not as isolated representatives but as collaborative global citizens invested in fostering inclusive and respectful intercultural communities.

In this way, relational empowerment equips Moroccan students with the interpersonal skills, cultural knowledge, and critical awareness necessary to sustain meaningful international relationships. As informal cultural diplomats, they can cultivate networks that reinforce Morocco's cultural presence globally while advancing cross-cultural understanding in lasting and transformative ways.

3.3.5. Shared Meals, Shared Meanings: The Diplomacy of Couscous

To go back to Salma's story mentioned in the introduction of this paper, if she had been educated in a system that integrates cultural diplomacy with critical pedagogy, her couscous story could have been transformed into a profound act of cultural representation. Behavioral empowerment (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016; Christens, 2012; Zimmerman, 1995), a key aspect of this integration, would have equipped her with the ability to actively engage in cultural exchanges, confidently explaining the tradition of sharing couscous from one dish as a reflection of Moroccan hospitality and communal values. By drawing on experiential learning opportunities, such as intercultural dialogues and cultural storytelling workshops, Salma could have turned a simple question into an enriching cultural exchange that bridges gaps and fosters understanding.

Similarly, emotional empowerment (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016) would have played a crucial role in helping Salma approach such interactions with confidence and pride. By nurturing emotional intelligence and cultural self-awareness, an education infused with critical pedagogy would enable her to navigate with self-assurance the stereotypical or challenging questions about Moroccan traditions. Emotional empowerment would not only bolster her ability to articulate the cultural significance of shared couscous but also create an authentic connection with her audience, helping them appreciate the human and emotional aspects of Moroccan culture.

Cognitive empowerment (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016) would have allowed Salma to critically analyze and deconstruct stereotypes about Moroccan traditions, presenting a nuanced and well-informed narrative. Through reflective practices and critical inquiry emphasized in such an educational framework, Salma could contextualize the tradition of communal couscous as a symbol of equality, community, and historical continuity in Moroccan culture. This ability to frame cultural narratives with depth and insight would have enabled her to challenge reductive views and fostered a richer, more inclusive understanding of Morocco's heritage.

Finally, relational empowerment (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016) would have facilitated Salma's ability to build meaningful connections with her Dutch peers through dialogue and shared experiences. By engaging in reciprocal cultural storytelling, she could have highlighted the shared values and universal aspects of Moroccan traditions while learning about other cultures. This relational approach, rooted in dialogue and collaboration, would have turned Salma's everyday interactions into opportunities for sustained cultural engagement. Such personal connections would extend Morocco's cultural diplomacy efforts, demonstrating the transformative power of individuals as unofficial ambassadors in fostering global cultural understanding.

4. Educational Framework for Cultivating Cultural Ambassadorship

4.1. Curriculum Design for Cultural Diplomacy

Integrating cultural diplomacy into the Moroccan educational curriculum necessitates a thoughtful design that emphasizes cultural awareness, historical understanding, and critical engagement. A curriculum centered on Moroccan history, arts, and literature would provide students with a deep-rooted sense of cultural identity. This content should be taught through a critical inquiry-based learning model, enabling students to interpret cultural narratives within historical and global contexts. For instance, analyzing key events in Moroccan history, such as its colonial struggles and post-independence cultural policies, would help students grasp the complexities of national identity. Similarly, studying Moroccan literature and arts through critical lenses would allow students to explore how cultural expression resists and reshapes dominant narratives, equipping them with the analytical skills needed to represent their heritage effectively.

4.2. Experiential Learning Models

Experiential learning offers a dynamic platform that fosters students' cultural diplomacy skills through real-world interactions. Intercultural projects and exchange simulations provide immersive experiences that mirror actual diplomatic encounters. Activities such as cultural festivals, model United Nations debates, and international collaboration platforms encourage active cultural representation while developing students' public speaking, negotiation, and storytelling abilities. For example, organizing cross-cultural workshops where Moroccan students collaborate with their peers from different countries would enhance mutual understanding while showcasing Morocco's cultural wealth. These experiential models transform students from passive recipients of knowledge into active cultural agents capable of managing with confidence and competence the different cultural interactions.

4.3. Language Education and Multilingual Competence

Effective cultural diplomacy hinges on multilingual competence, as language is a vital tool for cross-cultural communication and cultural representation. Moroccan students must develop proficiency in languages such as English, French, and Spanish, alongside their native Arabic and Amazigh. This multilingual education should extend beyond grammar and vocabulary, incorporating cultural immersion experiences that contextualize language learning within real-world scenarios. Students could participate in language-based cultural exchange programs, storytelling competitions, and media production projects that allow them to craft culturally authentic narratives. By mastering multiple languages, students would gain the communicative agility needed to navigate global cultural landscapes while advocating for Morocco's cultural values.

5. Practical Recommendations and Policy Implications

5.1. Policy Recommendations for Moroccan Education Authorities

To harness the full potential of Moroccan students as cultural ambassadors, the country's education authorities should implement policy reforms that integrate critical pedagogy into the national curriculum. This entails reshaping educational frameworks to emphasize intercultural communication, global citizenship, and cultural literacy. The Ministry of National Education could introduce mandatory courses on cultural diplomacy and international relations, designed through a critical pedagogical lens. Additionally, teacher training programs should be revised to equip educators with the skills to foster critical thinking, cultural sensitivity, and global awareness among students. Establishing cross-sectoral collaborations between educational institutions, cultural organizations, and diplomatic bodies would create a cohesive policy environment where cultural diplomacy becomes an essential pillar of education policy.

5.2. Institutional Partnerships and Capacity Building

Fostering cultural diplomacy requires sustained partnerships between Moroccan universities, cultural institutions, and international organizations. These collaborations could include joint research initiatives, student and staff exchanges, and cultural festivals that engage both local and global communities. Partnering with established cultural diplomacy networks such as UNESCO and the British Council would provide Moroccan students with broader platforms for cultural engagement. In this context, *L'Académie Marocaine des Études Diplomatiques (AMED)*, based in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stands out as a pioneering institution that has been training Moroccan and Sub-Saharan African students as future diplomats, embodying the spirit of educational diplomacy. Moreover, creating a national agency or expanding the mandate of institutions like AMED to further promote cultural diplomacy through education could centralize efforts, ensuring consistency and scalability. Funding opportunities through international grants and cultural sponsorships would further support student-driven cultural diplomacy projects, creating a robust infrastructure for long-term success.

5.3. International Collaboration and Cultural Funding

To reinforce its cultural diplomacy strategy, Morocco should expand its international collaborations through cultural agreements, educational exchange programs, and bilateral partnerships. These initiatives could focus on enhancing Moroccan students' global presence by securing scholarships, hosting international conferences, and supporting research projects on Moroccan culture and heritage. Establishing a dedicated cultural diplomacy fund would enable Moroccan universities and cultural institutions to implement large-scale cultural projects while maintaining financial sustainability. International collaboration should also prioritize *underrepresented cultural narratives*, such as Amazigh heritage, rural oral traditions, and Sub-Saharan Moroccan influences, to ensure a diverse and inclusive representation of the country's cultural identity on the global stage.

6. Addressing the Research Questions

6.1. Answering the Major Research Question:

How can integrating cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy principles into Moroccan curricula prepare students to become unofficial cultural ambassadors of their country?

Integrating cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy principles into Moroccan curricula can transform students into proactive cultural ambassadors by equipping them with critical awareness, intercultural communication skills, and a deep understanding of cultural narratives. Critical pedagogy emphasizes reflective thinking, cultural inquiry, and empowerment through dialogue and action (Kaufmann, 2010). These educational strategies develop students' ability to challenge stereotypes, articulate cultural perspectives, and navigate cross-cultural interactions. Incorporating experiential learning activities such as intercultural exchange programs, cultural storytelling workshops, and diplomatic simulations fosters students' ability to represent their country authentically and persuasively on the global stage. This integration positions students as informal diplomats, advancing Morocco's cultural influence through people-to-people diplomacy.

6.2. Addressing the Ancillary Questions

1. What key elements of cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy are most relevant for fostering cultural ambassadorship in Moroccan students?

Key elements include intercultural communication, multilingual proficiency, critical thinking, and cultural literacy. Cultural diplomacy focuses on fostering mutual understanding through cultural exchanges (Cummings, 2003: 1), while critical pedagogy emphasizes empowerment through reflective and participatory education (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016). Students must develop sociopolitical awareness and the ability to navigate global cultural narratives. Core components such as experiential learning, historical-cultural inquiry, and language-based cultural immersion prepare students to represent Morocco with authenticity and adaptability.

2. How can Moroccan curricula be adapted to include experiential learning that enhances students' cultural diplomacy skills?

The curriculum can be restructured to incorporate experiential learning models such as cultural exchange programs, project-based cultural research, and interactive diplomatic simulations. Courses on Moroccan history, arts, and literature can be designed around critical inquiry, enabling students to explore their cultural identity in context. Activities like organizing international cultural festivals, participating in global debates, and engaging in cultural storytelling projects enhance cultural representation and diplomatic skills (Akli, 2012: 40). These adaptations would allow students to experience real-world cultural diplomacy while refining their advocacy and negotiation abilities.

3. What measurable impacts can be expected from embedding cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy in educational programs aimed at global cultural engagement?

Expected impacts include increased intercultural competence (Hammer, 2015), enhanced cultural advocacy skills, and a stronger sense of cultural identity among students. Students would demonstrate improved confidence in representing Moroccan culture and navigating international environments. Measurable outcomes could involve higher participation rates in international exchange programs, greater student engagement in cross-cultural initiatives, and positive shifts in global perceptions of Moroccan culture. Long-term impacts could include stronger global cultural ties, expanded diplomatic networks, and enhanced national soft power through student-led cultural diplomacy efforts.

7. Conclusion

The growing interconnectedness of the global landscape underscores the need for more inclusive and dynamic approaches to cultural diplomacy. In this paper, we argued that Moroccan students possess untapped potential as unofficial cultural diplomats, capable of fostering cross-cultural understanding through education. By integrating critical pedagogy principles into the national curriculum, Moroccan educational institutions can cultivate globally minded citizens prepared to represent their country's cultural identity with depth, authenticity, and reflexivity.

We have demonstrated that traditional state-driven cultural diplomacy, while essential, cannot fully address the complexities of international cultural relations. Bridging Track I (official diplomacy) and Track II (unofficial diplomacy) through education-based cultural initiatives offers a transformative approach. Moroccan students, when equipped with critical awareness, intercultural communication skills, and a strong sense of cultural heritage, can become agents of Morocco's soft power, reshaping global perceptions through authentic people-to-people diplomacy.

The key recommendations we highlighted in this paper include curriculum reforms, experiential learning models, multilingual education, and policy changes aimed at fostering institutional partnerships and international collaborations. These measures could empower students to transcend the role of passive cultural informants, becoming active contributors to Morocco's cultural diplomacy strategy.

Looking ahead, a policy framework rooted in critical pedagogy and inclusive cultural engagement would create a sustainable model for cultural diplomacy. This integrated approach would balance state-led initiatives with grassroots student-led efforts, ensuring that Moroccan culture is represented authentically across borders. By reimagining cultural diplomacy as a shared educational responsibility, Moroccan students could emerge as cultural ambassadors shaping a more interconnected, culturally aware world.

While we highlight the promising potential of integrating cultural diplomacy and critical pedagogy into Moroccan educational curricula, several challenges merit critical reflection. First, the assumption that students can naturally transition into cultural ambassadors overlooks the complexities of cultural representation. Cultural identity is dynamic and multifaceted, and is often shaped by power imbalances, social biases, and personal interpretations. Expecting students to uniformly represent Morocco's cultural heritage risks oversimplifying and essentializing their cultural narratives. Moreover, without carefully designed educational frameworks, cultural ambassadorship may inadvertently reinforce dominant cultural narratives, marginalizing less represented identities within Morocco's diverse social fabric.

Another critical consideration is the political sensitivity inherent in cultural diplomacy. Encouraging students to engage in informal diplomacy might expose them to politically charged contexts, requiring careful ethical guidance. Additionally, embedding cultural diplomacy into education depends on sustained political and institutional support, which can be volatile due to shifting national policies and global political dynamics. If such support wavers, the proposed integration may remain theoretical, limiting its practical implementation. These complexities suggest that while the educational model proposed in this paper offers transformative potential, its success depends on continuous critical assessment, adaptive policy-making, and an inclusive pedagogical approach.

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