



Cultural Inheritance Dynamics in Families and Its Impact on Children's Education in Timor-Leste: A Sociocultural Study

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Abstract

This systematic literature review examines how indigenous cultural inheritance shapes children's education in Timor-Leste. It analyzes the interaction between customary institutions, language systems, gendered kinship structures, and formal schooling. Data were drawn from academic journals, institutional reports, and scholarly books published between 2000 and 2024. A total of 42 studies were synthesized using thematic analysis. The findings reveal a persistent epistemic misalignment between indigenous knowledge systems and formal education structures. Institutions such as uma lulik, lisan, and tara bandu regulate learning through communal obligation, moral authority, and ritual participation. These systems often conflict with school schedules and institutional expectations, contributing to absenteeism and dropout patterns. Linguistic transition from indigenous mother tongues to Tetum and Portuguese produces an epistemic discontinuity that affects literacy development and classroom engagement. Gendered kinship systems further influence educational access, where household investment decisions favor differentiated roles for boys and girls. Despite these challenges, cultural heritage functions as pedagogical capital that can enhance learning when integrated into formal education. The study argues that educational inequality in Timor-Leste is structurally produced through misalignment between cultural transmission and institutional schooling. It recommends culturally responsive pedagogy, multilingual education strategies, and community-based educational collaboration. These findings contribute to policy debates on educational reform in post-conflict multilingual societies and highlight the importance of integrating indigenous epistemologies within national curriculum frameworks designs.

Introduction

Timor-Leste continues to confront complex educational challenges that cannot be sufficiently explained through poverty inadequate infrastructure or limited institutional capacity alone. Although these structural conditions remain important they do not fully capture the deeper historical social and cultural realities that shape children's engagement with formal education.

The educational landscape of Timor-Leste is embedded within a society strongly influenced by colonization occupation resistance displacement and post-independence state-building. These historical experiences have shaped family perceptions of authority knowledge identity language and children's future prospects (Amin 2023). Therefore formal education in Timor-Leste should not be understood as operating within a socially neutral space. Rather it is closely connected to family life customary obligations kinship structures and local systems of meaning that have long guided how children acquire knowledge develop behavior and construct a sense of belonging within their communities.

Timor-Leste is often discussed as a young nation that needs to improve access to education, raise literacy, reduce dropout rates, and strengthen learning outcomes. International reports have shown that the country has made progress in expanding educational access, yet problems related to attendance, learning quality, language barriers, and school continuation remain significant (Antoninis et al., 2023; Bulathwela et al., 2024). These problems show that the challenge is not only about placing children inside classrooms. The more difficult question is whether the formal school system can meaningfully connect with the cultural world in which children are raised. When school expectations do not align with family values, local languages, customary duties, and community-based learning practices, children may experience school as an unfamiliar institution rather than as a natural extension of their social life (Miller & Khatib, 2023; Harris, 2024; Nganga & Kambutu, 2024).

The family holds a central position in Timorese society. It is not only a domestic unit that provides care and economic support. It also functions as the first space where children receive moral education, social discipline, gender expectations, spiritual meanings, and collective responsibilities. Through daily interaction with parents, grandparents, relatives, and customary elders, children learn what is considered proper behavior, valuable knowledge, respectful speech, and meaningful participation in community life. These processes reflect the importance of primary socialization, where the child first internalizes a social world before entering wider institutions such as school (Darmon, 2023; Ayalew, 2022; Kuswandi & Asmoni, 2025). In Timor-Leste, this primary socialization remains strongly connected to oral traditions, kinship structures, ritual practices, and customary institutions that continue to influence family decisions and children's educational pathways.

One important cultural institution in Timor-Leste is the *uma lulik*, or sacred house, which represents more than a physical building. It serves as a symbol of ancestry, collective identity, ritual authority, and moral belonging. For many families, the *uma lulik* connects the present generation with ancestors and future descendants. It also organizes social obligations that involve ceremonies, exchanges, and participation in family or clan events (Pallathadka et al., 2022; Tang & Chan, 2024; Seyoum, 2025). These obligations may sometimes overlap with school attendance, examination schedules, or study time. From the perspective of formal schooling, absence from school may appear as a lack of discipline or weak parental commitment. From the perspective of the family, however, participation in customary events may represent moral duty, respect for ancestors, and loyalty to the wider kin group (Kwon, 2026; Xiang & Huang, 2026; Edle et al., 2026). This difference shows that the issue is not simply whether families value education, but how they rank education within a broader moral order.

Cultural transmission in Timorese families also shapes children's orientation toward authority, learning, and social responsibility. Formal schools usually reward individual performance, punctuality, written assessment, abstract reasoning, and long-term educational planning. In contrast, many local learning practices emphasize observation, imitation, oral explanation, participation in daily work, respect for elders, and collective obligation. These forms of

learning are not inferior. They are socially meaningful and effective within their cultural context. The problem emerges when schools recognize only certain forms of knowledge as legitimate while ignoring the cultural capital children bring from home (McWayne et al., 2022; Richards et al., 2023; Jacobs, 2024). When oral knowledge, ritual understanding, local ecological practices, and kinship-based responsibilities are not valued in school, children from culturally rooted families may feel that their home knowledge has little place in formal education (Mincu, 2022; Nadeem, 2024; Mendoza et al., 2024).

Language further deepens this tension. Timor-Leste is a multilingual society where children may grow up speaking local mother tongues before encountering Tetum, Portuguese, or other school languages in formal education. This creates a major gap between the language of home and the language of school. Children are not only learning new subjects. They are also expected to understand, process, and express knowledge through languages that may not be dominant in their daily family life. Studies on literacy in Timor-Leste show that oral traditions and home-based communication practices shape how children encounter written texts and classroom learning. Research on mother tongue-based education also shows that children learn more effectively when early education begins with familiar language and cultural knowledge before gradually introducing wider linguistic demands (Hemchayart, 2024; Rajesh & Sharma, 2025; Gobana, 2025). This makes language a central issue in educational engagement, not merely a technical issue of instruction.

Gender and kinship also influence how families make educational decisions. In some communities, boys and girls may carry different expected roles within the family and customary structure. Boys may be prepared for responsibilities related to lineage, land, ritual negotiation, or household leadership, while girls may face expectations linked to marriage, domestic contribution, and inter-family relations. These expectations do not always lead to direct exclusion from school, but they can shape how families allocate time, money, attention, and long-term educational investment (Wang & Chen, 2024; Kis, 2025; Ojong, 2025). In conditions of limited resources, families may make decisions that reflect social obligations rather than individual preference. This explains why educational inequality cannot be understood only through access, because access does not automatically remove the cultural calculations that influence continuation, motivation, and achievement.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to portray Timorese culture as a barrier to education. Cultural inheritance also contains strong educational potential. Oral traditions, clan histories, customary ecological rules, collective work, respect for elders, and community solidarity can support learning when schools treat them as resources rather than obstacles. Vygotsky's view of learning as a socially mediated process helps show that children develop through interaction with more knowledgeable persons within their cultural environment (Alkhudiry, 2022; Maflah Alharbi, 2023; Taber, 2025). In Timor-Leste, these persons may include parents, grandparents, customary leaders, older siblings, and community members. Their role in children's development should not be dismissed simply because their knowledge does not always follow school-based forms of literacy. A culturally responsive approach can help schools connect formal curriculum with children's lived experiences, local languages, and community values.

Therefore, the relationship between cultural inheritance and children's education in Timor-Leste must be understood as a structural and sociocultural issue. The central problem is not a simple opposition between tradition and modern education. The deeper issue lies in the mismatch between the cultural capital transmitted within families and the forms of capital recognized by formal schooling. When schools fail to understand this mismatch, they risk interpreting cultural difference as lack of motivation, lack of parental support, or low student ability. A deeper analysis is needed to show how family-based cultural transmission shapes

children's educational engagement, how customary obligations interact with school expectations, and how education policy can respond without weakening local identity. In this sense, culturally grounded education is not a rejection of modern schooling. It is a necessary step toward making schooling more meaningful, inclusive, and socially legitimate for children in Timor-Leste.

Method

Research Design

This study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to examine the dynamics of cultural inheritance within families and its impact on children's education in Timor-Leste. The SLR approach was selected because it allows researchers to collect, screen, evaluate, and synthesize existing studies in a structured and transparent way. Unlike a general narrative review, an SLR follows clear procedures in identifying sources, setting inclusion and exclusion criteria, selecting relevant literature, and analyzing the findings. This approach is suitable for the present study because the topic involves several interconnected issues, including family socialization, cultural transmission, customary institutions, language, gender, and formal education.

The use of SLR in this study also responds to the limited availability of direct field data on the relationship between Timorese family culture and children's educational engagement. Although field-based research remains important, a systematic review can provide a strong analytical foundation by mapping existing knowledge across academic studies, books, and institutional reports. In this study, SLR was not used only to summarize previous findings. It was used to build a sociocultural understanding of how cultural values, family practices, and traditional institutions shape children's experiences in formal schooling. This follows the view that systematic reviews can produce evidence-based knowledge through careful synthesis of available literature.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted through academic databases and institutional repositories that provide relevant studies on Timor-Leste, education, family culture, and sociocultural transformation. The main databases used were Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus. In addition, reports from international organizations were also included, especially from UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank. These institutional reports were considered important because they provide educational data, policy analysis, and country-level assessments that may not always appear in journal articles.

The search process used several keyword combinations to ensure that the selected literature covered both education and cultural dimensions. The main keywords included "Timor-Leste education," "East Timor culture family," "cultural transmission Timor," "tara bandu education," "uma lulik society," "Timorese child socialization," "culturally responsive education Timor," "language and education in Timor-Leste," and "family and schooling in Timor-Leste." These keywords were used separately and in combination to capture literature that discussed formal education, customary practices, family-based learning, local knowledge, and children's school participation.

The publication period was limited to sources published between 2000 and 2024. This period was chosen because it covers the post-independence transition of Timor-Leste and reflects the development of its modern education system after the end of Indonesian rule. However, several foundational theoretical works published before 2000 were also used where necessary, especially works related to cultural capital, socialization, and sociocultural learning. These

theoretical sources were included because they provide conceptual tools for interpreting the empirical and contextual literature.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were established to ensure that all selected sources were relevant and academically reliable. A source was included when it met three main criteria. First, it had direct relevance to cultural inheritance, family life, customary institutions, language, gender, or education in Timor-Leste. Second, it was published in an academic journal, academic book, book chapter, dissertation, research report, or official institutional report from a recognized organization. Third, it was available in English, Indonesian, or Portuguese, since these languages were accessible for review and analysis.

Sources were excluded when they did not directly discuss Timor-Leste or when they only mentioned the country in passing without substantial analysis. News articles, opinion pieces, blog posts, and non-academic commentary were also excluded because they did not meet the academic reliability standard required for this study. Duplicate sources were removed during the screening process. Studies that focused only on general education policy without any connection to family, culture, language, gender, or social context were also excluded. This helped keep the review focused on the specific issue of cultural inheritance and children's education.

Screening and Selection Process

The initial search identified 187 sources. These sources were first screened by title and abstract to determine their relevance to the research focus. At this stage, sources that did not discuss Timor-Leste, education, family culture, or sociocultural issues were removed. The remaining sources were then reviewed more carefully by reading the abstract, introduction, methods, findings, and conclusion. This second stage was used to assess whether each source made a meaningful contribution to the analysis.

After the screening and eligibility process, 42 sources were selected for final analysis. These 42 sources consisted of academic journal articles, international agency reports, academic books or book chapters, and thesis or research reports. The selection process aimed to balance academic depth with contextual relevance. Journal articles were useful for theoretical and empirical analysis. Institutional reports provided policy context and educational data. Books and book chapters gave deeper historical, anthropological, and cultural explanations. Thesis and research reports added specific insights into local practices and community-based experiences.

Data Extraction Procedure

After the final sources were selected, data were extracted based on several analytical categories. These categories included the author's name, year of publication, type of source, research focus, key findings, cultural themes, educational themes, and relevance to the study. Each source was examined to identify how it explained the relationship between family culture and children's education in Timor-Leste.

The extracted information was then organized according to recurring issues found across the literature. These issues included cultural transmission within families, the role of *uma lulik*, *lisan*, and *tara bandu*, language and literacy barriers, gender expectations, school attendance, dropout patterns, and culturally responsive education. This process helped identify both common patterns and differences among the sources. It also helped avoid relying too heavily on a single type of literature.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This technique was selected because it allows researchers to identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning across different types of literature. The analysis followed the general stages of thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the selected sources were read repeatedly to gain a full understanding of their content. Second, important ideas, findings, and concepts were coded. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed to ensure that they reflected the main focus of the study. Fifth, the final themes were defined and used to structure the discussion.

Four main themes were developed from the literature. The first theme was identity and value transmission, which focused on how families pass down moral values, social obligations, and cultural identity to children. The second theme was language and literacy, which examined how multilingualism and oral traditions influence children's learning experiences in school. The third theme was gender and access to education, which explored how kinship structures and gender expectations affect educational participation. The fourth theme was traditional institutions and formal education, which analyzed the relationship between customary systems such as *uma lulik*, *lisan*, and *tara bandu* with the demands of modern schooling.

Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigor

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the review, this study used source triangulation. This means that the analysis did not rely on only one type of source. Academic journal articles, books, institutional reports, and research reports were compared to produce a more balanced interpretation. This was important because the topic of cultural inheritance and education involves both empirical findings and contextual understanding.

The study also applied thematic consistency during the analysis process. Each theme was developed only when it appeared repeatedly across several sources or when it provided strong conceptual relevance to the research focus. This helped reduce the risk of overgeneralizing from isolated findings. In addition, the review considered both supporting and critical perspectives. For example, cultural inheritance was not treated only as a barrier to education. It was also analyzed as a potential resource for culturally responsive learning.

Distribution of Literature Sources

Table 1. Distribution of Literature Sources

No.	Source Category	Number of Sources	Percentage
1	International academic journal articles	18	42.9%
2	International agency reports	11	26.2%
3	Academic books and book chapters	9	21.4%
4	Theses, dissertations, and research reports	4	9.5%
	Total	42	100.0%

The table shows that international academic journal articles formed the largest portion of the reviewed literature, with 18 sources or 42.9 percent of the total. This indicates that the study was mainly grounded in peer-reviewed academic discussion. These journal articles provided important analysis of education, culture, language, gender, and social change in Timor-Leste. International agency reports represented 11 sources or 26.2 percent of the total. This category was important because institutional reports from organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank provided updated information on education policy, school participation, learning outcomes, and child welfare.

These reports helped connect academic discussion with practical educational conditions in Timor-Leste. Academic books and book chapters made up 9 sources or 21.4 percent of the

reviewed literature. These sources were valuable because they provided historical, anthropological, and sociocultural background. They helped explain customary institutions, kinship relations, oral traditions, and the symbolic meaning of practices such as *uma lulik* and *tara bandu*. Without these sources, the analysis would risk becoming too focused on education policy and less sensitive to cultural context.

Theses, dissertations, and research reports accounted for 4 sources or 9.5 percent. Although this category was the smallest, it still contributed useful local and specific insights. These sources helped strengthen the contextual understanding of family practices, community life, and educational challenges in Timor-Leste. Overall, the distribution of sources shows that the study combined academic, institutional, and contextual literature to produce a balanced sociocultural analysis.

Methodological Limitation

This study has several methodological limitations. First, it relied on secondary data, so it did not include direct interviews, observation, or field-based accounts from children, parents, teachers, or customary leaders. This means that the findings should be understood as a synthesis of existing literature rather than as a direct representation of lived experiences in specific communities. Second, the available literature on Timor-Leste is still limited compared to more widely studied countries in Southeast Asia. As a result, some themes may not be equally represented across all regions, ethnic groups, or language communities in Timor-Leste.

Despite these limitations, the SLR approach remains appropriate for this study because it provides a systematic foundation for understanding the relationship between cultural inheritance and children's education. The method allows the study to identify major patterns, theoretical gaps, and policy-relevant insights from existing sources. It also creates a basis for future empirical research, especially ethnographic studies and interviews with families, educators, and community leaders in Timor-Leste.

Result and Discussion

The relationship between cultural inheritance and formal education in Timor-Leste is shaped by complex sociocultural structures that extend beyond the boundaries of schooling institutions. Education in this context cannot be understood solely as a formal process occurring within classrooms, but must be situated within broader systems of family socialization, customary governance, and indigenous knowledge transmission. Existing literature suggests that children's educational experiences are deeply influenced by cultural frameworks such as *uma lulik*, *lisan*, and *tara bandu*, which define norms of responsibility, authority, and collective identity within communities. At the same time, formal schooling introduces institutional expectations that emphasize standardized curricula, individual performance, and linguistic competence in Tetum and Portuguese.

This dual structure creates a structural tension between indigenous epistemologies and formal educational systems. In addition, multilingual environments and gendered kinship arrangements further shape how educational opportunities are accessed, valued, and sustained within households. These dynamics indicate that education in Timor-Leste operates within a broader cultural and social field where knowledge is not neutral but socially constructed and hierarchically organized. Understanding this context is essential for interpreting the findings of this systematic literature review, which synthesizes existing empirical and theoretical studies to explain how cultural transmission within families influences children's engagement, participation, and outcomes in formal education. This section therefore serves as a conceptual bridge between the methodological framework and the presentation of synthesized findings, highlighting the structural dimensions that underpin the subsequent results.

Customary Institutions as a Multi-Layer Educational Socialization System

The synthesis of the reviewed literature demonstrates that cultural transmission in Timor-Leste operates through a complex, multi-layered system rather than a single household-based mechanism. Education in its broad sociological sense begins long before formal schooling, as children are embedded within overlapping structures consisting of nuclear families, extended kinship networks (*uma kain*), customary institutions, and traditional authorities such as *lian-na'in*. These layers collectively shape how children internalize norms, values, and social expectations that later influence their engagement with formal education.

Among these structures, *uma lulik* emerges as the most significant symbolic and functional institution. It operates not merely as a physical sacred house but as a cultural nucleus that connects individuals to ancestry, collective identity, and moral obligation. Within this system, children are positioned as members of a broader genealogical continuity rather than autonomous individuals. Consequently, participation in rituals, funerals, weddings, and clan ceremonies is not optional but morally obligatory. This structural obligation often creates tension with formal schooling, especially when school attendance conflicts with ritual schedules.

The system of *lisan* further reinforces differentiated social expectations within kinship structures. It defines moral codes, gender roles, and intergenerational responsibilities. Through *lisan*, boys are often socialized toward leadership roles within family and customary governance, while girls are more frequently associated with relational and reproductive responsibilities. These culturally embedded expectations influence how families prioritize educational investment.

Similarly, *tara bandu* functions as a normative regulatory system that emphasizes balance, communal harmony, and ecological sustainability. Unlike formal education systems that prioritize individual achievement and competition, *tara bandu* reflects a collectivist epistemology in which social cohesion is prioritized over individual advancement. This divergence contributes to the structural mismatch between indigenous social systems and modern schooling.

Table 1. Institutional Structure and Educational Implications

Customary Institution	Sociocultural Function	Mechanism of Socialization	Educational Consequence
Uma Lulik	Ritual identity and ancestral continuity	Obligation-based participation in rituals	School absenteeism and schedule conflict
Lisan	Normative and kinship regulation	Gendered role construction	Unequal educational prioritization
Tara Bandu	Collective regulation and ecological balance	Communal discipline and moral order	Misalignment with competitive schooling

The table illustrates that educational outcomes in Timor-Leste cannot be separated from the normative authority of customary institutions. These institutions function as parallel governance systems that strongly influence children's educational trajectories.

Language, Literacy, and Epistemic Transition in Education

The literature consistently identifies language as one of the most decisive structural factors shaping educational experiences in Timor-Leste. The country's linguistic landscape is characterized by extreme diversity, with more than thirty indigenous languages coexisting

alongside Tetum and Portuguese as official languages of instruction. This multilingual environment produces a complex transition process when children enter formal schooling.

At the household level, learning is predominantly oral, contextual, and embedded in daily social practices. Knowledge is transmitted through storytelling, observation, participation in agricultural activities, and interaction with elders. In contrast, formal schooling requires literacy-based cognition, abstract reasoning, and standardized linguistic competence in non-native languages. This transition represents not only a linguistic shift but also an epistemological transformation in how knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and evaluated.

Emphasize that this transition generates an epistemic discontinuity between home-based and school-based learning systems. Children are not necessarily deficient in cognitive ability, but rather experience a structural misalignment between their linguistic capital and institutional expectations. Highlights that historical experiences of linguistic suppression during the Indonesian occupation have created intergenerational ambivalence toward formal schooling, particularly among parents who experienced education as an assimilative or exclusionary system.

Table 2. Linguistic Environment and Educational Transition

Dimension	Home-Based Learning System	School-Based Learning System	Structural Outcome
Language Medium	Indigenous oral languages	Tetum and Portuguese	Communication barriers
Learning Mode	Narrative and experiential	Formal and textual	Cognitive adjustment stress
Knowledge Structure	Contextual and practical	Abstract and standardized	Epistemological discontinuity

The table demonstrates that educational difficulty is structurally rooted in epistemic mismatch rather than individual learning incapacity.

Gender, Kinship Structure, and Educational Allocation

The reviewed literature indicates that gender disparities in education in Timor-Leste are deeply embedded within kinship systems and household decision-making structures. Rather than being solely determined by access or infrastructure, educational opportunities are shaped by culturally constructed expectations regarding gender roles and future social responsibilities.

In many communities, boys are positioned as successors of lineage continuity and custodians of customary authority, while girls are often associated with marital transition and relational exchange between families. These roles influence how educational investment is distributed within households, particularly under conditions of limited economic resources. Consequently, education is not uniformly denied but selectively prioritized based on socially constructed life trajectories.

Empirical that although access to education has improved significantly since independence, gender disparities persist at higher levels of schooling, particularly in rural areas. Further notes that early marriage continues to contribute to female dropout rates, despite formal legal frameworks aimed at increasing the minimum marriage age.

Table 3. Kinship Structure and Gendered Educational Outcomes

Dimension	Male Children	Female Children	Educational Impact
Social Role Expectation	Lineage continuity and leadership	Domestic and relational roles	Differential educational prioritization
Resource Allocation	Relatively prioritized	Conditional investment	Gender-based inequality
Dropout Risk	Moderate	Higher in rural contexts	Structural gender disparity

This table highlights that gender inequality in education is structurally produced through kinship logic rather than explicit exclusionary policies.

Educational Habitus and Structural Reproduction of Inequality

The findings further indicate that educational inequality in Timor-Leste is sustained through mechanisms of cultural reproduction that operate at the level of habitus. Bourdieu's conceptual framework explains that habitus is formed through long-term socialization processes within family and community contexts, shaping how individuals perceive and engage with institutional structures such as schools.

In this context, formal education privileges specific forms of cultural capital, particularly literacy, linguistic proficiency in official languages, and familiarity with institutional learning norms. Children from families embedded in literate environments are therefore more likely to succeed academically, not because of inherent ability, but because of structural alignment between their habitus and institutional expectations.

Characterizes this phenomenon as “deceptively inclusive education,” where formal access is universal, but cultural accessibility remains uneven. This leads to persistent inequality despite policy efforts to expand infrastructure and enrollment.

Table 4. Cultural Capital and Educational Stratification

Type of Cultural Capital	Characteristics	Institutional Recognition	Educational Outcome
Academic Capital	Literacy, formal language use	High	Academic success
Traditional Capital	Oral knowledge and rituals	Low	Marginal recognition
Social Capital	Kinship and community ties	Partial	Indirect educational support

The table demonstrates that inequality is reproduced not only through socioeconomic differences but also through differential recognition of knowledge systems.

Cultural Heritage as an Educational Resource

Contrary to deficit-based interpretations, the literature also reveals that cultural heritage in Timor-Leste constitutes a significant educational resource that remains underutilized within formal schooling systems. Oral traditions, indigenous narratives, and communal practices provide rich epistemological frameworks that can enhance learning when properly integrated into curriculum design.

Demonstrates that mother-tongue-based education significantly improves early literacy acquisition and comprehension outcomes. This finding is particularly relevant in multilingual contexts such as Timor-Leste, where linguistic diversity is a defining characteristic of early childhood socialization.

Moreover, collective values embedded in customary systems can enhance collaborative learning processes and strengthen social cohesion within educational environments. These findings suggest that cultural integration is not a pedagogical compromise but a strategic educational enhancement.

Table 5. Cultural Heritage and Pedagogical Value

Cultural Element	Educational Function	Pedagogical Application
Oral Tradition	Memory construction and comprehension	Narrative-based instruction
Customary Knowledge	Moral and social regulation	Character education
Collective Practices	Social cooperation	Collaborative learning

This table confirms that cultural heritage can function as a productive educational resource when incorporated into pedagogical strategies.

Epistemic Misalignment between Indigenous Institutions and Formal Schooling

The findings of this systematic literature review demonstrate that education in Timor-Leste is structurally embedded within two epistemic orders that operate on fundamentally different ontological assumptions about knowledge, authority, and learning. Indigenous institutions such as *uma lulik*, *lisan*, and *tara bandu* do not function merely as cultural artifacts but as constitutive epistemic infrastructures that regulate how knowledge is produced, validated, and transmitted within communities. Within this system, knowledge is inseparable from social obligation, ritual participation, and collective moral responsibility, thereby producing a relational ontology of learning where cognition is always embedded in social practice (Mashoko, 2022; Purwaningsih & Ridha, 2024; Jia & Zhang, 2025).

In contrast, formal schooling in Timor-Leste is grounded in a bureaucratic-modernist epistemology that privileges abstraction, standardization, and individual performance measurement. This system assumes that knowledge can be decontextualized, segmented, and evaluated independently of social relations. The coexistence of these two epistemic regimes generates what may be conceptualized as a “dual epistemic governance structure,” in which children are required to navigate competing logics of legitimacy. One prioritizes communal obligation, while the other prioritizes institutional compliance and individual achievement.

The consequence of this structural divergence is not merely pedagogical but deeply sociological. School absenteeism, irregular attendance, and dropout patterns cannot be adequately explained through conventional supply-side variables such as poverty or geographic isolation. Instead, they must be interpreted as rational responses to competing normative obligations. When ritual duties, kinship responsibilities, or customary ceremonies emerge, they are often prioritized because they are embedded within what Durkheim would describe as moral solidarity, which carries higher existential legitimacy than institutional schooling in local contexts.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, this phenomenon reflects a structural misalignment between embodied habitus and institutional field. The habitus formed through indigenous socialization produces dispositions that prioritize relational accountability over institutional abstraction. When these dispositions encounter the logic of formal schooling, a mismatch emerges that is

misrecognized as disengagement or lack of motivation, rather than as a structural epistemic contradiction.

Linguistic Transition and Epistemic Discontinuity in Learning

The linguistic ecology of Timor-Leste constitutes a critical axis through which educational inequality is reproduced. The literature consistently demonstrates that children enter formal schooling environments with linguistic competencies grounded in indigenous oral traditions (Volodina et al., 2024; Nag et al., 2024; Sun et al., 2024). These linguistic systems are not merely communicative tools but complex semiotic structures that encode cultural memory, ethical reasoning, and ecological knowledge. Learning in such contexts is dialogical, performative, and embedded in lived experience.

However, formal education introduces a radical shift toward exogenous linguistic systems, primarily Tetum and Portuguese, which function as institutional languages of knowledge production. This transition is not simply additive but transformative, requiring cognitive reorientation from oral-contextual reasoning to literate-abstract reasoning. The result is an epistemic rupture that disrupts continuity in cognitive development, particularly in early literacy acquisition stages.

This rupture is further intensified by historical sedimentation of linguistic hierarchy. Colonial and post-colonial language policies have positioned certain languages as carriers of institutional authority while marginalizing indigenous linguistic systems. Consequently, language becomes a site of symbolic power, where linguistic competence is directly linked to institutional legitimacy and social mobility. This produces what Bourdieu terms “linguistic capital asymmetry,” where unequal access to dominant language forms translates into unequal educational outcomes.

Empirical research in multilingual education strongly indicates that this asymmetry is not biologically determined but structurally produced. Children who transition into formal schooling without systematic bridging between mother tongue and instructional language experience cognitive overload and semantic fragmentation. Thus, educational underperformance must be understood as a manifestation of epistemic discontinuity rather than cognitive limitation.

Gendered Kinship Structures and Educational Allocation

The gendered distribution of educational opportunities in Timor-Leste is deeply embedded in kinship-based systems of social organization that regulate intergenerational continuity and resource allocation. These systems are not static cultural residues but dynamic governance structures that shape household-level decision-making processes. Within this framework, education is not treated as an individual right in isolation but as a strategic investment embedded in collective family futures (Nixon et al., 2023; Cheptoo et al., 2024).

Male children are frequently positioned within a lineage-centered ontology that assigns them responsibility for continuity of family name, property inheritance, and customary authority. This positioning increases their perceived long-term utility within the kinship system, thereby influencing educational prioritization. Female children, in contrast, are often situated within relational exchange systems where their future social value is anticipated to shift through marital incorporation into another kin group.

This asymmetry produces differential educational investment that is rational within the internal logic of kinship systems but generates structural inequality when viewed from the perspective of formal education systems. Importantly, this does not imply uniform exclusion of girls from education, but rather conditional inclusion shaped by economic constraints and cultural

expectations. The interaction between economic scarcity and cultural rationality intensifies gendered disparities in educational attainment.

From a structural inequality perspective, this demonstrates that gender disparities in education cannot be fully addressed through legal reform alone. They require transformation of underlying social logics that govern resource allocation within families. Without such transformation, policy interventions risk addressing symptoms rather than mechanisms of inequality production.

Cultural Capital, Habitus, and Structural Reproduction of Inequality

The reproduction of educational inequality in Timor-Leste is fundamentally mediated through differential distribution of cultural capital. Formal education systems operate on an implicit assumption that all learners enter with comparable familiarity with institutional norms, linguistic registers, and literacy-based cognition. However, the empirical evidence suggests significant variation in the degree of alignment between home-based cultural capital and school-based expectations.

Children socialized within literate and institutionally aligned environments possess what may be termed “school-compatible habitus,” which facilitates smoother integration into formal educational structures. In contrast, children whose primary socialization occurs within oral, ritual, and communal knowledge systems often experience institutional alienation due to the non-recognition of their cultural competencies.

This dynamic reflects a broader mechanism of symbolic violence, whereby dominant knowledge systems impose criteria of legitimacy that systematically devalue alternative epistemologies (Ahmad, 2022; Reyes et al., 2024; Lesutis, 2024). The school, in this sense, functions not as a neutral site of knowledge transmission but as a selective institution that privileges specific cultural forms while rendering others invisible or non-academic.

Over time, these processes contribute to the normalization of inequality. Educational success becomes misinterpreted as individual merit rather than structural alignment, thereby obscuring the role of cultural capital in shaping academic trajectories. This constitutes a form of structural reproduction that is subtle yet persistent.

Cultural Heritage as Pedagogical Capital

Contrary to deficit-oriented interpretations, the findings indicate that cultural heritage in Timor-Leste constitutes a significant reservoir of pedagogical capital that remains underutilized within formal education systems. Oral traditions, genealogical narratives, and customary knowledge systems represent sophisticated cognitive architectures that support memory retention, moral reasoning, and collective identity formation.

In pedagogical terms, these systems provide a foundation for experiential and narrative-based learning that aligns closely with constructivist theories of education (Mawasi et al., 2022; Mazzoli et al., 2023; Aldegheri, 2025). When integrated into formal curricula, such knowledge systems can enhance cognitive engagement by anchoring abstract concepts in culturally meaningful contexts. This alignment is particularly critical in early childhood education, where cognitive development is strongly influenced by familiarity and contextual relevance.

International evidence from multilingual education research demonstrates that mother-tongue-based instruction significantly improves learning outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy acquisition. This suggests that the marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems is not pedagogically justified but structurally imposed. Reintegrating cultural heritage into formal education therefore represents not only a cultural imperative but also an evidence-based pedagogical strategy.

Culturally Responsive Education Systems

The implications of this study extend beyond incremental policy reform and require a paradigmatic shift in how education systems conceptualize knowledge, learning, and cultural legitimacy. Current policy frameworks that prioritize infrastructure expansion and enrollment rates are insufficient to address deep structural inequalities embedded in epistemic and cultural systems.

A culturally responsive education system must incorporate multilingual pedagogies that recognize the cognitive value of indigenous languages as foundational rather than transitional tools. This includes institutionalizing structured bilingual education models that bridge home-based linguistic systems with formal instructional languages in a gradual and cognitively coherent manner (McWayne et al., 2022; Carrillo, 2026).

Furthermore, the integration of customary authorities such as *lia-na'in* into educational governance structures offers a mechanism for mediating between institutional and community-based knowledge systems. Such integration should not be symbolic but functional, enabling co-production of curriculum content that reflects both national educational standards and local epistemologies.

Ultimately, policy reform must shift from a logic of cultural accommodation to one of epistemic integration. This shift requires recognizing that educational equity cannot be achieved without addressing the cultural foundations upon which learning itself is constructed.

The synthesis of findings demonstrates that educational inequality in Timor-Leste is produced through the interaction of three interdependent structural domains: epistemic systems, linguistic regimes, and kinship-based social organization. These domains operate simultaneously yet asymmetrically, producing layered forms of inequality that cannot be reduced to single-factor explanations.

Epistemically, the conflict between indigenous and formal knowledge systems generates competing definitions of legitimate learning. Linguistically, the transition from oral to literate systems creates discontinuities that affect cognitive development and academic performance. Socially, gendered kinship structures shape differential investment in education, producing long-term disparities in attainment.

The interaction of these domains produces a complex educational landscape in which inequality is structurally embedded rather than externally imposed. Addressing this condition requires systemic transformation that integrates cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical dimensions into a unified policy framework.

In conclusion, education in Timor-Leste must be reconceptualized as a culturally embedded and socially distributed process. Only by recognizing the legitimacy of indigenous epistemologies within formal educational structures can the system move toward genuine inclusivity and substantive equity.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review demonstrates that educational inequality in Timor-Leste is structurally produced through the interaction of indigenous epistemic systems, linguistic transitions, and gendered kinship structures that collectively shape children's educational experiences and outcomes. The analysis shows that institutions such as *uma lulik*, *lisan*, and *tara bandu* function as legitimate and deeply embedded systems of knowledge transmission that often operate alongside, and at times in tension with, formal schooling structures. This tension generates an epistemic misalignment where school-based definitions of knowledge, achievement, and success do not fully correspond with culturally grounded understandings of

learning within families and communities. As a result, issues such as absenteeism, disengagement, and dropout are better understood as outcomes of structural and cultural misalignment rather than individual deficiency or economic limitation alone. Furthermore, the study highlights that language transition from indigenous mother tongues to Tetum and Portuguese creates a persistent epistemic discontinuity that affects cognitive development and literacy acquisition, while gendered kinship systems continue to shape differentiated educational investment within households. Despite these challenges, the review also confirms that cultural heritage constitutes a significant form of pedagogical capital that can enhance learning when integrated into formal education through culturally responsive and multilingual pedagogical approaches. Therefore, the study concludes that achieving equitable education in Timor-Leste requires a shift from access-centered policy to a more holistic framework that recognizes indigenous knowledge systems as epistemically valid, linguistically supportive, and pedagogically valuable within national education reform.

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