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# Exploring the influence of Aberu on teacher trainees in Iran: A cultural-historical perspective

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**Abstract:** Cultural factors are crucial in shaping teacher training programs, affecting curriculum, instructional strategies, and the learning environment. This study investigates the impact of Aberu, which is an Iranian concept of honor and social reputation emphasizing the maintenance of dignity and societal respect, on teacher trainees using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Through qualitative analysis of interviews with 14 trainees from various Iranian teacher training centers, the study reveals that Aberu significantly influences their professional development. Key findings indicate that trainees experience heightened stress, sleep deprivation, fear of failure, and internalized perfectionism as they strive to meet Aberu standards. Aberu mediates their interactions and learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), leading to self-imposed standards and a deep sense of responsibility to uphold their cultural identity. Understanding the influence of Aberu on teacher trainees has significant implications for designing culturally responsive training programs that support the needs of diverse learners and promote culturally competent teaching practices. Finally, the article concludes that by integrating cultural considerations into teacher training, educators can better prepare trainees to navigate the complexities of the educational landscape in Iran and beyond.

**Keywords:** Aberu; cultural schema; teacher training; cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)

## 1. Introduction

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping teacher training programs, influencing curriculum design, instructional approaches, and the overall learning environment [1]. Understanding the cultural backgrounds and perspectives of teacher trainees is crucial for promoting culturally competent teachers, who are better equipped to engage diverse students and foster equitable educational outcomes [2,3].

In the context of Iranian teacher education, understanding and addressing cultural factors is vital for effective training [4]. A key cultural concept in Iranian society is Aberu, which refers to one's honor, reputation, or dignity, and maintaining Aberu is considered crucial in many social interactions and personal conduct [5]. However, despite the importance of such cultural considerations, there is limited research examining their role in Iranian teacher training [4].

This study aims to fill the gap in existing research by specifically exploring the impact of Aberu on the professional development of teacher trainees in Iran. Using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a theoretical framework, this research examines how Aberu shapes trainees' experiences, particularly in relation to their psychological responses (e.g., stress levels, sleep deprivation, fear of failure) and their strategies for preparing for teaching practice. By providing a deeper understanding of

these cultural pressures, this study offers valuable insights into how cultural factors influence the training process and contributes to the broader conversation on integrating cultural competence into teacher education programs [6,7].

## **2. Literature review**

While previous research has acknowledged the importance of cultural factors in teacher training and the need for culturally competent teachers [8,9], there is a gap in understanding how a specific cultural construct like *Aberu* influences the experiences and practices of Iranian teacher trainees. To address this gap, this study draws on CHAT, a theory that emphasizes the role of cultural tools, social interactions, and historical contexts in shaping learning and development [10–12]. This framework will help us explore how *Aberu* mediates trainees' interactions and learning within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and uncover the specific challenges and strategies they employ to navigate the pressures associated with this cultural concept.

### **2.1. Cultural factors in teacher training**

From influencing curriculum development to instructional strategies and the overall learning environment, cultural factors play a significant role in teacher training programs [13]. In diverse educational contexts, it is vital for teacher training programs to incorporate cultural awareness [14], ensuring that teachers can effectively engage with students from varied cultural backgrounds and promote equitable educational outcomes. For example, curriculum design must reflect cultural sensitivity, incorporating diverse perspectives that allow students to see their own experiences valued in the learning process. Instructional strategies, too, must adapt to the cultural norms of the students, as methods that work in one cultural context may not be as effective in another. Furthermore, classroom management approaches must be responsive to cultural expectations and social dynamics, fostering an environment where students feel respected and understood.

Bărbuleț [8] elaborates on the integration of culture into language teacher training to promote a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of culture, which would be beyond surface-level aspects. Their study underscores the need to integrate culture into language education to enrich teaching performance. Similarly, Abacioglu et al. [15] suggest that teacher training and professional development activities could be more effective if they focused on cultural competence because they can help teacher trainers navigate diverse teaching contexts effectively.

Aneja [16] emphasizes that the native-nonnative dichotomy in language teaching significantly affects teacher training, as cultural perceptions of language proficiency often lead to biases in self-perception among preservice teachers. This underscores the necessity for teacher training programs to address the complexities of language identity, moving beyond simplistic classifications and fostering a curriculum that promotes an understanding of fluid cultural identities.

In the context of China, Zhang and Liu [17] reveal that English teachers' beliefs are heavily influenced by Confucian traditions, resulting in a tension between traditional and contemporary pedagogical approaches. Such cultural influences necessitate teacher training programs to recognize these belief systems and provide

support for teachers to reconcile their traditional values with innovative practices. This highlights the importance of culturally responsive teacher training that respects and integrates various belief systems into educational curricula. Pishghadam et al. [18] argue that teacher training programs must equip educators with strategies to teach cultural factors alongside language skills, fostering intercultural competence. This integration not only enhances language proficiency but also prepares students to engage meaningfully with diverse cultures, thus emphasizing the role of cultural factors in teacher training.

The importance of understanding and addressing issues of race and diversity in teacher training is also highlighted by Bhopal and Rhamie [19]. Their research indicates that Initial Teacher Training (ITT) students' understanding of race is influenced by their cultural backgrounds, necessitating explicit training on these issues. Similarly, Almuhammadi [20] identifies in the Saudi Arabian context that socio-cultural factors shape educational barriers, further underscoring the need for teacher training programs to emphasize cultural awareness.

In the context of Iranian teacher education, understanding and addressing cultural factors is vital for effective training. *Aberu* profoundly influences how teachers perceive their roles and responsibilities, their relationships with students and colleagues, and their approach to authority and discipline. Teacher trainees who are not attuned to the significance of *Aberu* may struggle to navigate the cultural expectations that shape classroom interactions, potentially leading to misunderstandings or conflicts. For instance, trainees may face challenges in establishing authority or managing student behavior if they are unaware of the deep-rooted cultural values tied to honor and respect. Given the centrality of *Aberu* in Iranian society, it is crucial that teacher trainers incorporate this cultural framework into their training programs. Teacher trainers must be equipped to address the complexities of *Aberu* and help trainees reconcile their cultural values with the expectations of modern educational practices. Without such awareness, teacher trainees may find themselves ill-prepared to engage meaningfully with students, particularly in a culturally diverse classroom. Therefore, the integration of *Aberu* into teacher training is not just beneficial but essential for fostering culturally responsive educators who are capable of navigating the nuanced social dynamics of Iranian classrooms.

## **2.2. Cultural-historical activity theory**

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), developed by Lev Vygotsky, offers a framework for understanding the socio-cultural context of learning and development [21]. CHAT emphasizes the role of cultural tools, social interactions, and historical contexts in shaping individuals' cognitive processes and educational experiences. By examining the interplay between cultural factors and educational practices, CHAT provides insights into how cultural norms and values influence teaching and learning processes.

In the realm of education, CHAT has been instrumental in analyzing the impact of cultural factors on learning processes, teacher training, and professional development. Nussbaumer [10] offers a critical perspective on CHAT's utilization in

educational research, highlighting its potential to elucidate the intricate relationships between cultural contexts and educational practices. Similarly, Lupu [11] explores CHAT's application in collaborative learning within educational settings, demonstrating how cultural factors shape group learning dynamics. Jo et al. [12] studied the ICT in education activity system of teachers in developing countries, providing insights from interviews that reveal how cultural and technological contexts influence educational practices. Schmidt [22] underscores the relevance of Activity Theory for understanding phenomena in educational contexts, emphasizing its utility in investigating diverse learning environments.

CHAT's application in educational research extends beyond classroom interactions to broader institutional and policy-driven contexts. It has been widely used to examine teacher professional development programs, curriculum reforms, and the implementation of new pedagogical approaches [23–25]. By analyzing how teachers and learners engage with tools, rules, and communities in specific educational settings, CHAT allows researchers to identify systemic tensions and areas for pedagogical innovation. For example, CHAT has been instrumental in evaluating how novice teachers adapt to institutional expectations while developing their own professional identities [26]. This approach also provides insights into the role of mentorship, peer collaboration, and policy constraints in shaping teacher agency and instructional practices. Through this lens, CHAT enables a holistic exploration of learning and teaching as evolving, socially mediated activities, making it a valuable theoretical foundation for studies on teacher education.

These studies collectively contribute to a broader understanding of CHAT's usefulness in examining cultural influences on educational practices. They demonstrate how cultural norms and values impact learning processes, offering valuable insights for teacher training and professional development programs. By integrating these findings into our current study, we can refine our theoretical framework and research questions to better address the cultural dimensions of education.

### **2.3. Cultural construct of Aberu**

In Iranian culture, the term “Aberu” (also spelled “aberoo” or “abru”) contains significant cultural and social connotations. It refers to one's honor, reputation, or dignity. Maintaining Aberu is considered crucial in many social interactions and personal conduct. Unlike some western cultures where individualism is emphasized, in Iranian culture, the concept of Abru has a collective dimension [27]. The concept includes not just individual reputation but also family and community honor. For example, a student's academic achievements are often seen as a reflection of their family's social standing. If a student excels in their studies, it is viewed as a source of pride for the entire family, enhancing their collective honor. Conversely, if a student performs poorly or behaves in a way that is seen as dishonorable, the family may experience shame, as their actions are perceived to tarnish the family's Aberu. Aberu is a multi-layered concept that integrates personal dignity, social standing, and moral conduct. It reflects how an individual is perceived by society and how they uphold societal norms and expectations [5]. If a teacher engages in unethical behavior, such

as taking bribes or displaying a lack of professionalism, it can negatively affect not only their personal reputation but also the honor of their family. Furthermore, in the context of classroom management, a teacher must demonstrate moral conduct by maintaining respectful relationships with students and colleagues. Any breach of these social norms can result in a loss of respect from both the students and the wider community.

In Iranian culture, preserving one's *Aberu* is often linked to various aspects of life, including family, social interactions, and even business practices. The importance placed on *Aberu* can lead to social pressure to conform to accepted norms and behaviors. Individuals may feel compelled to act in ways that align with societal expectations to avoid ruining their *Aberu*.

*Aberu* stands as a fundamental cultural concept in Iranian society, embodying notions of dignity, honor, and respect. It shapes individuals' behaviors, decisions, and interactions within various social spheres, including education. Moreover, in Iranian educational contexts, *Aberu* influences various aspects of teaching and learning, including classroom management, student-teacher relationships, and instructional approaches. Understanding the manifestations of *Aberu* in educational settings is essential for developing culturally relevant teaching practices and promoting student success [28]. Teachers in Iranian culture are expected to maintain high standards of professionalism and moral conduct to maintain their *Aberu*. Teacher training programs should emphasize the importance of ethical behavior, integrity, and professional boundaries [29]. This ensures that teachers serve as role models for students, thereby preserving their own *Aberu* and that of the educational institution. Therefore, teacher training programs should incorporate cultural sensitivity training to help educators understand and respect the cultural backgrounds of their students. Recognizing the importance of *Abreu* in students' lives can guide teachers in creating a respectful and inclusive classroom environment. According to Rahimi and Mirzaei [30], cultural sensitivity training can include discussions on how different cultural values, such as *Aberu*, influence student behavior and expectations.

Despite the recognition of *Aberu*'s importance in Iranian culture, there is a paucity of empirical research examining its specific impact on teacher trainees in Iran. Existing studies often overlook the ways in which *Aberu* shapes the experiences and perceptions of teacher trainees, focusing instead on broader cultural influences in education. Addressing this gap can provide valuable insights into the cultural dynamics of language teacher training programs in Iran and inform efforts to promote cultural competence among educators.

#### **2.4. Theoretical framework for the current study**

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a particularly suitable framework for this study because it offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the interaction between individuals and their socio-cultural contexts. CHAT is grounded in the idea that learning is a socially and culturally mediated process, which aligns with the goal of this study to explore how cultural factors—specifically *Aberu*—influence teacher trainees' experiences in Iran. By emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between cultural values, identity, and professional practices, CHAT

allows for a deep exploration of how cultural concepts like *Aberu* shape not only the trainees' sense of self but also their agency and teaching practices.

This is crucial in the context of Iranian teacher education, where culture plays a significant role in shaping how teachers understand their roles, their students, and the broader educational system. Furthermore, CHAT's focus on the historical and social contexts of learning enables the study to account for the unique cultural, historical, and social factors that influence teacher training in Iran. This framework also supports the exploration of how cultural tools—such as the concept of *Aberu*—mediate interactions and shape the learning and teaching processes within a community of practice. Thus, CHAT is an ideal framework for understanding the complex dynamics of teacher training in culturally rich and context-specific environments like Iran.

## **2.5. Research questions**

To explore the impact of *Aberu* on teacher trainees in Iran, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How does the cultural construct of *Aberu* influence the psychological and social experiences of teacher trainees in Iran, particularly in terms of stress levels, sleep patterns, and fear of failure?
- 2) How do teacher trainees in Iran navigate and embody the concept of *Aberu* during their preparation for teaching practices, and how do these actions reflect the integration of *Aberu* values into their professional identities and behaviors?

## **3. Method**

### **3.1. Context and participants**

This study was conducted in a prominent teacher training center and language institute in Iran, which is known for its comprehensive teacher training courses and programs. Throughout the year, at least four teacher training courses and 10 professional development workshops are held in this institute. Most of the trainees are hired by the institute based on their potential and begin their teaching journey there.

For participant selection, a convenience sampling approach was used, as participants were recruited based on their availability and willingness to take part in the study. For this study, I sent invitations to the WhatsApp groups I had with the trainees, inviting those who were interested in participating. 14 trainees from three different teacher training courses were accepted to participate in this study. These trainees were all under the guidance of the same trainer, who is also the researcher of this study, had between 0 to 3 years of teaching experience, and had various academic degrees accepted to participate in this study (**Table 1**).

To adhere to ethical guidelines, all 14 participants consented to participate in this study. The participants were briefed on the study's objectives and assured of the confidentiality of their answers during the semi-structured interviews.

**Table 1.** Teachers’ demographic information.

Teacher	Gender	Age	Education	Experience
T1	Female	22	BA Student TEFL	0
T2	Male	21	BA Psychology Student	0
T3	Male	29	MA TEFL	3
T4	Female	24	BA Student English Translation Studies	1
T5	Female	26	MA Student TEFL	2
T6	Male	22	BA Student TEFL	0
T7	Female	30	BA English Literature	1
T8	Female	27	MA English Literature	3
T9	Male	24	BA student TEFL	0
T10	Male	28	BA TEFL	3
T11	Male	26	MA Student English Translation Studies	
T12	Female	25	BA TEFL	2
T13	Male	27	BA Educational Studies	2
T14	Male	25	BA TEFL	1

### 3.2. Data collection

This qualitative study employs in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to explore the influence of Aberu on teacher trainees in Iran. Online semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, allowing for rich insights into their experiences and perspectives. Online semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility and ability to reach participants from various locations, ensuring diverse representation while accommodating the logistical challenges of in-person interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data, providing a deeper understanding of the role of Aberu in shaping the experiences of teacher trainees.

Each interview took about 15 min. Each interview followed a pre-designed guide with open-ended questions aimed at exploring participants’ experiences, perceptions of Aberu, and its influence on their professional development. Follow-up questions were asked during the interviews to clarify responses or delve deeper into emerging themes. All interviews were recorded, with participants’ consent, to ensure accuracy and allow for thorough analysis. After the initial interviews, participants were contacted for clarification or elaboration on specific points when necessary, ensuring transparency and reliability in the data collection process. The following shows the questions asked during the interview sessions:

- 1) To what extent did you care about saving Aberu in front of your trainer and fellow trainees? (This question explores the individual’s engagement with the concept of Aberu within a specific social context (trainers and fellow trainees). It seeks to understand the importance of social dynamics and cultural expectations in shaping behavior, reflecting CHAT’s focus on the role of community and social interactions in activities).
- 2) Did you put yourself under pressure to preserve your image? How? Why? (This question addresses the internal and external pressures affecting the individual’s

actions and decisions. It examines how personal and social factors (e.g., expectations, norms) influence behavior, aligning with CHAT's interest in how external and internal factors interact within activity systems).

- 3) Is attempting to preserve your Aberu something personal, or does it have broader implications in your life? (This question explores the personal versus societal dimensions of maintaining Aberu. It explores how personal actions are connected to broader social contexts and the implications for one's overall life, which is consistent with CHAT's emphasis on the relationship between individual actions and broader societal systems).
- 4) Did your efforts to maintain your Aberu disrupt your normal life and mental state? How? (This question investigates the impact of maintaining Aberu on the individual's life and mental well-being. It looks at how engagement in an activity (preserving Aberu) might affect other aspects of life, highlighting the interconnectedness of different elements within an activity system, a key concept in CHAT).

The interview questions were carefully designed to align with CHAT's emphasis on how cultural and social contexts mediate human activity. Since Aberu operates at the intersection of personal identity and collective expectations, the questions aimed to explore both individual experiences and the broader cultural forces shaping them. By examining participants' internal pressures and social dynamics, the design sought to uncover the underlying tensions between personal agency and cultural norms. Furthermore, the questions progressed from immediate experiences to broader implications, allowing for an exploration of how Aberu influences not only daily professional interactions but also long-term identity development. This approach ensured that the interviews effectively captured the depth and complexity of Aberu's role in shaping participants' professional lives.

The participants were selected according to convenience sampling since all the trainees could have the potential to participate in this study. According to Herren et al. [31], it is the weakest of all sampling procedures, and the findings cannot be generalized. However, the researcher had direct access to trainees within the institute, which made it the most efficient method for collecting data without the logistical challenges of reaching participants from external organizations. Additionally, the participants were already part of the cultural and institutional setting being studied, ensuring that their experiences were highly relevant to the research aims. While convenience sampling is often seen as less robust in terms of generalizability, its use in this study was justified by the context-specific nature of the research.

### **3.3. Data analysis**

The data were collected and analyzed following the guidelines of qualitative thematic analysis [32]. After the interviews were conducted, the data were transcribed and translated into English. The transcriptions were then coded using the components of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which provided a theoretical framework for organizing the data. The initial codes were developed based on emerging themes that reflected key aspects of CHAT, such as Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), identity, and scaffolding. For example, when a participant

described “putting oneself under too much pressure not to make any mistakes”, this was coded as ‘fear of making mistakes’ and related to ZPD. Once the initial codes were generated, they were collated into potential themes by grouping similar codes. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they aligned with the components of CHAT, such as understanding the relationship between the psychological and social aspects of the trainees’ experiences. To enhance the reliability of the findings, the analyzed data were reviewed by participants, who were invited to check the accuracy of the transcripts and ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretations [33]. This process also helped to clarify how the codes and themes related to CHAT’s theoretical constructs, ensuring that the final analysis reflected the participants’ lived experiences.

#### 4. Findings

Analyzing interviews through Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) reveals several key themes that affect trainees in teacher training programs. First, the pressure to maintain Aberu—cultural dignity—leads to intensive preparation and significant stress, as trainees strive to meet high cultural and professional standards. Second, sleep deprivation and exhaustion arise from the obsessive need to uphold Aberu, impacting trainees’ well-being. Third, the fear of making mistakes and losing Aberu drives anxiety and perfectionism during teaching practices. Finally, the internalization of cultural expectations results in self-imposed high standards and pressures. These themes illustrate how cultural values shape trainees’ experiences, suggesting a need for supportive training environments that balance cultural pressures with personal well-being (Figure 1).

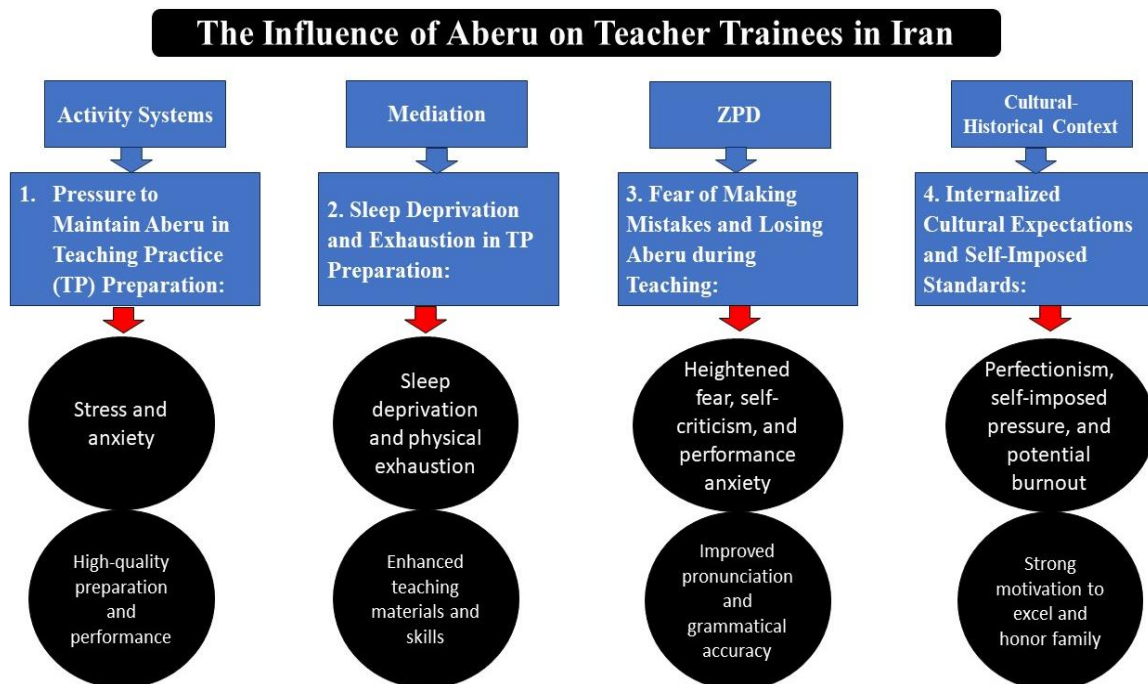


Figure 1. The influence of Abreu on teacher trainees in Iran.

To better clarify how the findings align with Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), it's important to highlight how each theme relates to the core components of the activity system. In CHAT, the activity system consists of the subject (the trainees), the tools (such as Aberu), the rules (cultural and professional expectations), the community (trainers, peers, and family), and the division of labor (roles and responsibilities in teacher training). The pressure to maintain Aberu is understood as a cultural tool that mediates the trainees' preparation and performance by influencing their stress and perfectionism.

#### **4.1. Activity systems**

##### **Pressure to maintain Aberu in teaching practice (TP) preparation**

This theme reflects the socio-cultural context in which trainees engage in learning activities (preparing for TPs) within teacher training programs. The pressure to maintain Aberu aligns with the goals, norms, and division of labor within the activity system of teacher training, shaping trainees' experiences and practices. Trainees expressed a sense of pressure to uphold Aberu values and expectations in their preparation for teaching practices (TPs). T10 emphasized feeling immense pressure to uphold Aberu in front of former coworkers, investing significant time and energy into preparing materials and delivering TPs effectively:

*Some of the trainees already knew me and we used to work together in an institute. I spent lots of time and energy to prepare the best material and I did my best to do the TPs very well to be appreciated by my former coworkers, otherwise I would lose my Aberu. I think I had to save my Aberu to get their validation and of course the trainer's validation too.*

The quote from T10 illustrates the intense pressure trainees face to maintain Aberu, which in this case is directly tied to their professional and social standing within the community of the teacher training program. According to the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the concept of Aberu in this context can be understood through the lens of the activity system, which encompasses the trainee's goal of performing well in teaching practices (TPs), the norms and expectations of the community (including former coworkers and trainers), and the tools (such as teaching materials and preparation time) that mediate their practices.

T10's efforts to meticulously prepare the best material reflect the division of labor within the activity system—where the trainee feels obligated to adhere to the expectations of both coworkers and trainers in order to retain cultural and professional credibility. The pressure to maintain Aberu is shaped by the social context in which these trainees operate. In this case, their success is not only evaluated by their peers but also by those with authority (the trainers), making the stakes higher.

Furthermore, this focus on material preparation aligns with the tools component of CHAT, where tools (such as teaching resources and lesson plans) are seen as critical for achieving the desired outcome. By investing significant time and energy into these materials, T10 demonstrates how trainees utilize tools to meet the cultural and professional expectations tied to Aberu. The act of face-saving here is not just about individual reputation but about maintaining a shared cultural identity within the community of practice.

In broader socio-cultural terms, this needs to seek validation from both peers and authority figures exemplifies the social norms that govern behavior in the training system. These norms dictate that trainees must uphold a certain level of professionalism and competence to avoid social sanctions or perceived failure, which would be seen as a loss of *Aberu*. Thus, the intense effort to prepare thoroughly is not just a matter of individual ambition but of sociocultural survival within the structured framework of the teacher training program.

The pressure to represent *Aberu* positively in their teaching performance leads to heightened levels of stress and anxiety during TP preparation. T9 recounted the immense stress he felt while teaching in front of a qualified trainer and experienced teachers. He vividly described the physical manifestations of his anxiety, such as a trembling voice and hands, during practice sessions:

*You have no idea how much stressed I was when I was teaching in front of a qualified trainer and a bunch of experienced teachers. I remember that each time I had to practice teaching, my voice and hand started shaking and I was so tensed up.*

This quote illustrates the pressure participants face to excel in teaching practices and maintain their *Aberu* in the presence of authoritative figures within the training program, and as the extracts explain. In the context of CHAT, this reflects how the community and rules within the activity system influence the participants' behaviors. The need for validation from both colleagues and trainers (the division of labor) and the tools (e.g., teaching materials and practices) participants use to achieve their goals are all shaped by cultural expectations of *Aberu*. This pressure is not merely individual but embedded within the broader socio-cultural system, which can disrupt the normal flow of their lives as trainees strive to meet these expectations.

In Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the activity system serves as a framework through which human actions are understood not only as individual but also as socially situated, embedded in complex structures of culture, values, and norms. In the context of maintaining *Aberu*, participants are not merely acting in isolation but are constantly navigating a broader social and cultural network that shapes their behavior and emotional responses. The community in this activity system includes not only the trainees themselves but also their trainers, former coworkers, and peers. Each member of the community exerts influence on how *Aberu* is understood and enacted in the training environment. The expectations for how one must perform in front of these communities—whether that means impressing a former coworker or seeking approval from a trainer—are integral in shaping how participants define success and failure. The rules within this system, both explicit and implicit, define the boundaries of acceptable behavior, creating an internalized pressure to adhere to cultural norms of face-saving, validation, and reputation maintenance.

The tools within this system, primarily the instructional materials and teaching techniques, are used by participants to fulfill the demanding expectations placed on them. However, these tools are not neutral or benign; they are shaped by the broader socio-cultural context. For instance, the effort to craft 'perfect' teaching materials to impress the trainer or maintain *Aberu* highlights the double-edged nature of professional preparation. On one hand, these tools facilitate the trainees' entry into the profession, yet on the other, they become instruments of anxiety and self-judgment, as

participants worry whether their materials and delivery will meet the cultural standards of Aberu. The tools used in preparation—lesson plans, teaching resources, and even the method of lesson delivery—are part of an elaborate process of signifying one's worth, not only as a professional but as a person within the societal context that values reputation and honor.

The division of labor in this activity system is equally significant. Trainees are positioned in relation to those who hold authority, such as the trainer and more experienced teachers. These relationships are not only hierarchical but culturally loaded with expectations about how one should behave to maintain Aberu. The trainer, for example, represents an institutional authority whose validation is crucial in shaping a trainee's professional identity. However, the peer group—the former colleagues—introduces an additional layer of social complexity. These peers are part of the community, and their approval is necessary for the trainee to feel socially validated and secure in their Aberu. Thus, the division of labor reflects not just the distribution of teaching tasks but also the shifting power dynamics that influence the trainees' sense of self-worth, emotional well-being, and professional identity. The tension between meeting the expectations of both the trainer and the peer group creates a complex emotional landscape, where the desire to maintain Aberu can clash with the need to authentically grow and develop as a teacher.

However, although the pressure to maintain Aberu is predominantly seen as a source of stress, it is also possible that it serves as a motivator for some trainees, pushing them to achieve higher standards of excellence. The tension between societal expectations and personal aspirations creates a fertile ground for self-discovery, where individuals are pushed to exceed their limits, refine their practice, and achieve a higher level of professional and personal excellence. This duality—where pressure becomes both a burden and a source of motivation—is an inherent part of the human condition, particularly within socio-cultural frameworks where reputation and honor are foundational to one's identity. In this light, the pursuit of Aberu is not merely a task of compliance but an opportunity for self-actualization and professional transcendence, ultimately shaping the trajectory of the trainee's journey toward becoming a more effective and confident teacher. Additionally, the degree of pressure and its effects may vary based on individual differences such as personality traits, previous experiences, and personal resilience.

## **4.2. Mediation**

### **Sleep deprivation and exhaustion in TP preparation**

Trainees' behaviors of sacrificing sleep and extensive preparation can be seen as mediated by cultural tools and symbolic resources (e.g., Aberu values and expectations) within the socio-cultural context. This mediation influences trainees' actions and decision-making processes, contributing to their experiences of sleep deprivation and exhaustion.

Trainees report sacrificing sleep and staying up late the night before TPs to ensure they are fully prepared. T1 described feeling immense pressure to save their Aberu in front of experienced fellow trainees and the researcher. They recounted staying awake

until early morning to prepare their teaching materials, driven by a desire to be the best and showcase their teaching abilities:

*T1: I did my best to save my Aberu in front of my experienced fellow trainees and you. I was under too much pressure and I kept myself awake to prepare my teaching materials. I remember the nights before the TPs, I went to bed at 4 or 5 in the morning. I wanted to be the best and show off my teaching abilities.*

*Researcher: so, you mean you found yourself under too much pressure just to save your Aberu, right?*

*T1: yes, when it comes to Aberu, I always put myself under pressure.*

T1 expressed that Aberu always placed them under pressure the days and nights before TPs, highlighting the significant influence of cultural expectations on their preparation for TPs. This quote illustrates the extent to which participants internalize Aberu ideals and the impact it has on their behaviors and experiences within teacher training programs.

The fear of not meeting Aberu standards leads to obsessive preparation behaviors, such as extensive lesson planning and rehearsal, contributing to sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion. T5 expressed concern about maintaining their image as an experienced teacher in front of fellow trainees, emphasizing their desire to avoid making mistakes that could undermine this perception. He described practicing extensively and sacrificing sleep to prepare for TPs, demonstrating a commitment to demonstrating competence and upholding Aberu values in their teaching practices.

*T5: My fellow trainees had understood that I was a teacher and I didn't want them to think that I make mistakes as an experienced teacher.*

*Researcher: I see. So, what did you do to save your Aberu?*

*T5: I practiced hard and I stayed up. Sometimes I didn't sleep at all just to practice for my TPs.*

This quote by T5 illustrates the significant pressure participants feel to meet Aberu standards and the lengths they go to in order to fulfill these expectations within the teacher training context. The emphasis on maintaining Aberu reflects how cultural values are internalized and influence individual actions within the activity system of teacher training. The resulting sleep deprivation and exhaustion illustrate the contradictions and tensions within this activity system, as the cultural imperative to uphold Aberu conflicts with the trainees' need for rest and well-being.

Recognizing the impact of Aberu on trainees' well-being can help training programs implement strategies to mitigate these pressures. Encouraging a culture of collaboration rather than competition among trainees can alleviate some of the pressures associated with maintaining Aberu. Additionally, creating a supportive environment that values effort over perfection can help trainees balance their cultural obligations with their personal health.

### **4.3. Zone of proximal development (ZPD)**

#### **Fear of making mistakes and losing Aberu during teaching**

This theme reflects trainees' experiences of anxiety and fear within their ZPD, the gap between their current level of development (e.g., teaching skills) and their potential level of development with support from cultural tools and social interaction.

Aberu serves as a cultural tool that mediates trainees' interactions and influences their learning experiences within the ZPD.

Trainees express anxiety and fear of making mistakes during teaching, as it may be perceived as a failure to uphold Aberu values. T7 expressed a fear of losing Aberu or reputation in front of her trainer and fellow trainees if she was unable to meet expectations or made mistakes during TPs. She believed that her performance directly impacted her social standing and credibility within the training program:

*I think that I expected myself to have the best performance during the TPs because I believed that if I wasn't able to satisfy the expectations, I would lose my Aberu in front of my trainer and if I made a mistake, I would lose Aberu in front of my fellow trainees. So, I worked hard to do the best.*

This quote highlights the pressure she feels to excel and avoid errors in order to maintain her Aberu and preserve her perceived competence and status among her peers and mentors.

Rather than simply fearing failure, T7's fear of losing Aberu becomes a catalyst for learning, leading them to actively seek support and resources to meet the expectations placed upon them. In this way, saving Aberu becomes a mediator in their ZPD, encouraging them to take the necessary steps to bridge the gap between their current performance and their potential development.

The fear of making mistakes and losing Aberu in front of younger peers highlights the immense pressure T1 felt to maintain his cultural identity and reputation within the training program:

*I was the oldest member of the course. I was even older than the trainer. So, it was a like a disaster to me if I made a mistake in front the younger people. I worked hard, I got help from some of my friends, who were English teachers, to prepare the best TPs. So...yes, my only motivation to ace my TPs was my Aberu.*

T1 emphasized the significant pressure he felt as the oldest member of the course, even surpassing the trainer in age. He viewed making a mistake in front of younger peers as a potential disaster, driving him to work diligently and seek assistance from friends who were English teachers to prepare the best TPs possible. This underscores the participant's strong motivation to excel in their TPs, driven primarily by a desire to uphold their Aberu. T1's fear of making a mistake in front of younger peers drove him to seek assistance from more experienced colleagues, aligning with the ZPD's concept of learning through social interaction and support.

The pressure to maintain Aberu perfectionism leads to a heightened fear of failure and self-criticism, impacting trainees' confidence and performance in teaching situations. The participant expressed a deep aversion to being judged by fellow trainees, fearing that any grammatical or pronunciation mistakes would threaten their Aberu. This fear drove them to meticulously check the pronunciation of every word they intended to teach and become overly focused on correct grammatical structures:

*I hated to be judged by the other trainees. If I made any grammatical or pronunciation mistakes, I was sure that they would have judged me and it threatened my Aberu. To prevent this problem, I checked the pronunciation of every single word that I wanted to teach very carefully and I was also too obsessed with the correct grammatical structures. I bought a dictionary which was about English language grammar to check the structures that I wanted to*

*use in my TPs. Although this obsession made me frustrated, I learned lots of new grammatical structures and I corrected my pronunciation errors.*

The concept of “saving Aberu” acts as a profound mediator within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). At its core, Aberu, as a culturally bound marker of respect, reputation, and social identity, shapes the trainee’s interactions and aspirations within their ZPD. It compels individuals to seek guidance, support, and validation from more experienced figures, such as trainers and peers, creating a cycle of engagement that fosters incremental progress. The pressure to uphold Aberu pushes trainees to work diligently, reaching out for external resources and feedback that allow them to inch closer to their potential development. In this sense, Aberu transforms into a tool that steers learning toward socially sanctioned goals, aligning the individual’s personal growth with collective expectations.

However, this cultural tool also functions as a double-edged sword. While it can foster diligence and collaboration, it simultaneously constructs boundaries that shape how learning unfolds within the ZPD. The fear of losing Aberu leads trainees to prioritize perfection over authenticity, engaging in learning behaviors that are driven more by external validation than by an intrinsic desire for mastery. This fear can limit the willingness to embrace mistakes, stifling the vulnerability necessary for deep, transformative learning. Thus, “saving Aberu” becomes a paradox within the ZPD: It is both an impetus for striving toward higher competence and a constraint that curtails the more expansive, exploratory elements of learning.

Understanding the fear of making mistakes and losing Aberu can help training programs develop more supportive and inclusive learning environments. Creating a culture that normalizes mistakes as part of the learning process and providing constructive feedback can reduce anxiety and promote a growth mindset. Additionally, mentorship and peer support can help trainees navigate the pressures of maintaining Aberu while developing their teaching skills.

#### **4.4. Cultural-historical context**

##### **Internalized cultural expectations and self-imposed standards**

Trainees’ internalization of Aberu ideals and self-imposed standards can be understood within the broader historical and cultural context of Iranian society. This theme highlights how cultural-historical factors shape trainees’ beliefs, values, and behaviors, influencing their professional development within teacher training programs. A quote by T12 aligns most closely with the theme of “Internalized Cultural Expectations and Self-Imposed Standards.” It reflects the participant’s deep sense of personal responsibility to uphold her Aberu (dignity) in every aspect of her academic and social interactions. The quote illustrates how the participant internalizes cultural expectations and sets high standards for herself, driven by a desire to protect her cultural identity and honor her family:

*I sometimes realize that I do everything I can to protect my Aberu. every class, every course, every time I talk to my students and classmates, I do my best to save my Aberu because my Aberu is my dignity. I’m responsible to be the best and make my parents proud of me.*

The emphasis on doing her best in every class and interaction highlights the self-imposed standards she feels obliged to meet in order to maintain her Aberu and make her parents proud. Because according to the Persian culture, her Aberu is integrated with her parents' Aberu.

Trainees internalize Aberu cultural values and expectations, imposing high standards of performance and behavior on themselves. The internalization of Aberu results in self-imposed pressure and perfectionism, driving trainees to strive for excellence in their teaching practices. This illustrates how the upbringing and cultural teachings have implanted in some of the participants a strong belief in striving for excellence and avoiding averageness. The quote highlights the participant's internalization of these cultural expectations, as he feels compelled to prepare his teaching practices obsessively in order to be the best:

*when I was a child, my parents and grandparents taught me not to be ok with being an average person. this belief had affected the way I prepared my TPs obsessively to be the best. A little voice inside me reminds me of my dignity. I have to be best to save my Aberu so I work hard and show my best version.*

The emphasis on maintaining their dignity (Aberu) and the internal reminder to uphold it reinforce the idea of self-imposed standards driven by cultural values. Moreover, the internalization of Aberu ideals reflects how cultural values are transmitted through social interactions and upbringing, influencing trainees' motivations and actions. The self-imposed standards driven by the desire to maintain Aberu demonstrate the deep integration of cultural expectations into personal identity and professional conduct.

Understanding the impact of internalized cultural expectations on trainees can help teacher training programs develop more supportive and culturally sensitive environments. Providing guidance on managing self-imposed pressure and perfectionism, as well as fostering a culture that values progress over perfection, can help trainees balance cultural expectations with their personal well-being. Mentorship programs that emphasize self-compassion and realistic goal-setting can also be beneficial.

## **5. Discussion**

This study delves into the influence of Aberu, a cultural construct deeply embedded in Iranian society, on the experiences and perceptions of teacher trainees. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, I uncovered significant insights into the ways in which Aberu shapes the professional development journey of teacher trainees in Iran. The findings reveal that the pressure to maintain Aberu standards exerts a profound impact on trainees, leading to heightened stress levels, sleep deprivation, fear of failure, and internalized perfectionism. These outcomes underscore the complex interplay between cultural identity and professional development within teacher training programs. The central argument of this study is that Aberu, as a cultural schema, significantly influences the professional development of teacher trainees in Iran, manifesting in various psychological and behavioral outcomes. This highlights the need for culturally responsive training programs that acknowledge and address these cultural pressures.

While this study highlights the profound personal and psychological effects of *Aberu* on individual trainees, it is equally important to consider how these pressures are shaped and reinforced within the broader social and collective context. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) suggests that individual actions and motivations are inherently tied to community interactions, and the dynamics between trainees, trainers, peers, and even family members play a pivotal role in perpetuating *Aberu*'s influence. For instance, a trainee's fear of failure may not solely stem from internalized perfectionism but also from explicit or implicit expectations communicated by their social environment. Trainers' feedback, peer competition, and familial expectations collectively construct and reinforce the cultural construct of *Aberu* by creating a systemic source of pressure. Understanding this interplay between the individual and the collective is crucial for developing culturally responsive training programs because such programs should not only address personal coping mechanisms but also foster collaborative environments that reduce competition, encourage mutual support, and challenge societal norms that perpetuate undue pressure.

Analysis of the data revealed that the cultural construct of *Aberu* has significant effects on the trainees of the teacher training courses in Iran. Trainees experience heightened stress levels, sleep deprivation, fear of failure, and internalized perfectionism as they strive to maintain *Aberu* standards in their teaching practice (TP) preparation. These findings align with previous research highlighting the pervasive impact of cultural factors on teacher training programs [1].

The first theme, the pressure to maintain *Aberu* in TP preparation, illustrates how societal norms, institutional rules, and self-imposed guidelines govern trainees' activities. This pressure aligns with previous research on societal norms and instructional rules affecting teacher training outcomes [34,35]. The implications for teacher training programs are profound: policymakers and educators must consider these cultural pressures when designing curricula and support systems to mitigate stress and promote well-being.

While the theme of self-imposed standards highlights the profound influence of *Aberu* on individual trainees, it is essential to examine how these standards intersect with contradictions within the broader activity system of teacher training. Drawing on CHAT, these tensions become evident when individual goals, such as maintaining *Aberu* to uphold personal and familial reputation, conflict with collective objectives like fostering learning, growth, and collaboration among trainees. For instance, the emphasis on *Aberu* may inhibit open dialogue, discourage risk-taking, and prevent trainees from seeking support when struggling, thereby impeding the shared goals of professional development programs.

Such contradictions have significant implications for trainee development and well-being. While striving to uphold *Aberu* can motivate high standards and discipline, it can also generate stress, isolate individuals from peer support, and restrict the co-construction of knowledge. Teacher training programs must address these systemic contradictions by fostering an environment where cultural values like *Aberu* are acknowledged without compromising the collective ethos of mutual learning.

The second theme identifies *Aberu* as a cultural tool and symbolic resource mediating trainees' preparation. This finding echoes McAllister and Irvine [36], who emphasize the importance of cultural tools in creating effective learning opportunities.

Teacher trainers should incorporate cultural mediators into the curriculum, recognizing the role of mass culture and visual culture in shaping trainees' experiences [37].

The third theme, fear of making mistakes and losing Aberu, reflects trainees' anxiety and fear within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Aberu acts as a cultural tool mediating learning and interaction within the ZPD, aligning with studies on proximal teacher development [38,39]. This study extends Vygotskian theory to the Iranian context, suggesting that cultural tools like Aberu significantly impact trainee interactions and learning. Educators should consider these cultural dynamics when supporting trainees' development.

The fourth theme highlights how cultural-historical factors shape trainees' behaviors, aligning with the principles of cultural-historical theory in teacher education [40]. While parallels with Chinese educators' experiences [4] provide a comparative lens, the discussion must avoid overgeneralizing findings across cultural contexts. Teacher training systems differ significantly due to socio-political structures, institutional priorities, and local cultural nuances. Within Iran itself, variations among teacher training institutions and regional educational practices likely influence how Aberu manifests in trainees' experiences.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1. Recommendations for future research**

Rather than assuming uniformity, future research could explore how specific institutional or regional settings shape interpretations of Aberu and its impact on professional development. A comparative analysis of Aberu's role in different types of teacher training programs (e.g., university-based vs. private language institutes) could provide deeper insights into how professional socialization influences teachers' perceptions of cultural expectations. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking teachers over time could reveal how concerns about Aberu evolve with experience and career progression. Another important avenue for future research is examining gender dynamics in Aberu-related experiences, as cultural expectations may differ between male and female teachers, influencing their professional identity formation in distinct ways. Finally, expanding the scope beyond Iran to cross-cultural comparisons could highlight whether similar cultural constructs exist in other educational contexts and how they shape teacher development. Recognizing these layers of complexity ensures that findings contribute meaningfully to cross-cultural discourse while remaining grounded in local specificities.

### **6.2. Implications for teacher education**

Based on the findings, several recommendations are essential for educators and policymakers to enhance teacher training programs. First, it is crucial to develop culturally responsive training programs that acknowledge and address cultural pressures like Aberu, integrating cultural mediators into the curriculum to align with trainees' societal contexts. Additionally, implementing robust support systems is necessary to mitigate stress and promote well-being, taking into account the specific

societal and cultural norms that impact trainees. Educators should also be encouraged to enhance their cultural competence to effectively support trainees within their cultural framework.

To address the need for culturally responsive training programs, this study recommends several specific policy actions to enhance the relevance and applicability of teacher training in Iran. First, educational authorities should integrate culturally responsive training into both university-based teacher education programs and institute-level training courses. Embedding modules that explicitly address cultural schemas like *Aberu*, fostering trainees' awareness of their influence on professional behavior and decision-making. For instance, workshops on navigating cultural pressures and balancing personal and professional expectations could be included as part of the teacher preparation process.

Second, professional development for trainers should focus on building cultural competence, equipping them with tools to recognize and mitigate the impact of cultural factors on trainees' stress and performance. Practical initiatives, such as case studies, role-playing activities, and reflective practice sessions centered on real-life cultural scenarios, would provide trainers with deeper insights into how *Aberu* and similar cultural schemas operate within the educational context.

Finally, institutions could implement mentorship programs pairing trainees with experienced teachers who have successfully navigated these cultural challenges, creating a support network that fosters resilience and adaptability. By grounding these recommendations in specific strategies, the study aims to promote a more inclusive and supportive framework for teacher development in Iran.

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