

Article

Understanding the Significance of Cultural Heritage in Society from Preschool: An Educational Practice with Student Teachers

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Abstract: To understand the significance that cultural heritage has today and, above all, the role of citizens in decision-making for its valorisation, transmission, and management, it is necessary to approach it from a very early age, specifically through childhood education. Hence, this action research study is proposed for 56 infant teachers in initial training at the University of A Coruña (Galicia, Spain). This is a descriptive case study that aims to investigate the perceptions of early childhood education teachers in initial training about cultural heritage (definition: economic, cultural, and educational uses; agents involved in its transmission, management, etc.). In addition, the paper analyses the changes and continuities that occur in student teachers' perceptions after carrying out a didactic proposal through relevant social problems linked to the *Ribeira Sacra* cultural landscape. This action research study has allowed students to give more importance to intangible cultural heritage and to gain a better understanding of controversial issues related to cultural heritage, such as the balance between economic and cultural use, as well as citizens' roles in a decision-making process related to cultural heritage. Despite engaging in didactic activities, a substantial portion of students still retain a conservative outlook on heritage education.

Keywords: cultural heritage; heritage education; critical thinking; initial training in preschool; *Ribeira Sacra*



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1. Introduction

Understanding the role of cultural heritage is fundamental for shaping an inclusive society where people can identify with their heritage. Citizens need to understand that they should actively participate in heritagisation and de-heritagisation processes, thereby combating any attempts to impose exclusive symbols that only serve the interests of certain groups with political or economic power. In this sense, if schools adopt a critical approach to heritage education from an early age, they can make a significant contribution. For this, the first step is to provide initial training to future teachers regarding the meaning of cultural heritage and the role of citizens in processes related to its valuation, transmission, and management.

1.1. Meaning of Cultural Heritage

The meaning attributed to heritage has evolved throughout history. It originally emerged as a collectible item in the 18th century, representing a testimony to the history of the society that built it. In the 19th century, it gained documentary value and was defined as a cultural asset with intangible significance, reflecting events, ways of life, and beliefs of peoples. In the first half of the 20th century, it became associated with the community as a “common good”, undergoing a revaluation based on the social function given by the citizens. However, since the second half of the 20th century, in addition to its cultural and

social value, heritage has acquired notable economic value, turning it into a commodity [1,2]. In the ongoing 21st century, experiencing the past through heritage sites has become a common habit for most individuals in urbanised societies and a pervasive area of public concern [3]. Heritage is nowadays considered an important source of international prestige and a powerful resource for attracting tourism activities [4].

Currently, the notion of heritage can be understood from two opposing perspectives or paradigms that coexist in specialised heritage and management fields, whether from institutions, businesses, or academia [5]. The first paradigm is the classical one, in which heritage assets have intrinsic value. They are exceptional and unique in any context, and materiality constitutes a fundamental element that must be protected at all costs [6]. It also establishes a hierarchy, as these assets represent the elites, who establish aesthetic, historical, and nature-related criteria dictated by the authority of disciplinary experts [7].

On the other hand, the constructivist paradigm [8,9] has spread closer to an anthropological vision of culture. It is also known as the “values-based approach” [6] and is supported by the “critical theory of heritage”. This paradigm posits that heritage elements are not self-referential but result from a social construction in which each social group, based on its cultural patterns and worldviews, selects values and assets that symbolise those meanings, giving great importance to intangible elements. Therefore, expert or disciplinary criteria no longer prevail, and local knowledge gains significance [5]. Heritage becomes a social and political construct, with conflict being an inherent element in heritagisation processes [10,11]. Both paradigms coexist in day-to-day heritage management, overlapping and complementing each other, generating tensions and controversies that explain many of the resistances and demands related to participation in heritage and have led to a progressive democratisation of heritage [5].

Despite the fact that the term heritage already has a cultural meaning, the more widespread concept currently is that of cultural heritage, influenced by anthropology, to emphasise its valuable contribution to understanding the identity of a community [12–14]. The focus shifts from the object to the subject that creates, understands, enjoys, and, in this process, recreates the heritage. Therefore, the emphasis is not so much on the element itself but on the value attributed to it [15]. From an anthropological perspective, cultural heritage is considered a social construct where one or several groups select specific cultural traits as part of a social process or “heritagisation” [16,17]. According to Walsh [18], who first introduced the concept of heritagisation, it refers to the process by which objects and places undergo a transformation from functional entities into objects of display and exhibition. This framework accentuates the idea that genuine heritage status is not inherent. Instead, it is attained after navigating a multifaceted heritagisation process, which is marked by the comprehensive acceptance of specific individuals or groups. This highlights that cultural assets acquire their heritage value solely through intentional recognition and purposeful transformation [19].

In 1972, UNESCO’s Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage approved the definition of cultural heritage, although it only considered tangible heritage: monuments, groups of buildings, or sites [20]. In 1989, intangible elements were incorporated, highlighting popular and traditional cultures. Intangible cultural heritage is understood as creations originating from a community, stemming from tradition, expressed by groups or individuals, and representing the cultural and social identity of that community [21]. In 2001, the significance of intangible heritage was reinforced through the declaration of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. In 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, held in Paris, issued the definition with the greatest global consensus:

Practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with

nature, and their history. It provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, only intangible cultural heritage that is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups, and individuals, and the need for sustainable development will be considered [22].

However, it is important to note that some authors question the meanings of the terms “tangible” and “intangible” associated with cultural heritage [23–25]. According to Vaquer [23], what truly characterises intangible cultural heritage is not its supposed intangibility but the collective or diffuse condition of the elements that constitute it. Carrera (2015) refers to this as the procedural component of this heritage. Therefore, Vaquer [23] rejects the opposition between tangible and intangible cultural heritage established both by UNESCO’s Convention and Spanish legislation (Law 16/1985 and Law 10/2015) [26,27]. Instead, he agrees with what is stated in the preamble of Law 10/2015: “Essentially, in all cultural assets, there is a non-tangible symbolic component, and...the interrelationship between the tangible and intangible is profound and, in many cases, inseparable” (p. 45285).

1.2. Cultural Heritage and Citizen Participation Processes

Authors such as Carrera [25] deny that there are elements that inherently have a heritage character; instead, she recognises that it is the actors, with their different perspectives, who carry out heritagisation processes. Following this perspective, it is essential to understand the agents driving each heritage element, why they do it, what the contents are, and which collective is invoked [28]. Therefore, any heritagisation process has political connotations, as it renders specific characteristics of certain groups visible and prominent while rendering others invisible, silenced, or distorted [2].

When referring to heritage elements representing the memory of a group, it is necessary to question how that memory is considered, i.e., how representative elements are selected, why those and not others, and which elements are undervalued or omitted. In this selection process, a group symbolises a version of its memory and its own identity. Until the mid-1960s, this constituted the institutional history, making it most suitable for defining the nation–state [10].

However, heritage is no longer viewed solely as a set of symbols that unify the nation–state. Instead, it is defined as a space of conflict where the interests of different social groups become visible [11]. Until the early 20th century, issues related to heritage were driven by the state and the academics in its service. However, nowadays, other actors have been incorporated, such as administrations, the business and financial sectors, as well as organised citizen groups [10]. Incorporating the interests of these different stakeholders in the heritage management process as a way of reinforcing the idea of community engagement is considered a highly relevant component of the heritagisation process [29]. In fact, benefits such as a sense of belonging, trust, and credibility among community members are associated with community participation in heritage conservation and valorisation [30]. As a result, social groups that were previously silenced and lacked representation have become more visible. They now have a relevant voice in the heritagisation processes to reclaim cultural elements they consider at risk or with which they identify [25]. In the current context of territorialisation–deterritorialisation or globalisation–localisation dialectics, certain heritagisation processes can become alternatives from social, environmental, political, and symbolic perspectives. Thus, these heritagisation processes are often considered ways of mitigating the impacts of globalisation and homogenisation resulting from it [31].

However, despite the prominence given to local communities in UNESCO’s 2003 Convention, some authors argue that they have not achieved significant presence and empowerment in decision-making, both in relation to world heritage and regional or national heritage selections [32]. Among the reasons why participation processes do not thrive [33] are the discontinuity of processes, the slowness or failure of the administration to implement them, the appropriation of meanings, and the influence of tourism and heritage economies.

1.3. Critical Heritage Education in Early Childhood Education

Heritage education has garnered significant interest in the educational community. This interest aligns with the realisation that effective heritage conservation and sustainability depend on cultivating public awareness and a sense of responsibility toward heritage, a purpose best instilled through education [34,35]. In particular, attention has been given to the didactic potential heritage offers for teaching social content from a critical perspective [1,14,36–39].

A critical vision of heritage education has been well defined by Santisteban et al. [40]. According to these authors, heritage education must accept the inheritance and responsibility of preserving heritage for future generations. It should allow for the association of heritage with individual and collective identities as well as give visibility to marginalised individuals, groups, and identities. Furthermore, critical heritage education should foster a critical interpretation of heritage and establish connections between the past, present, and future, developing historical consciousness. Lastly, it should identify the ideological criteria behind any selection, valuation, and preservation process while constructing counter-narratives to the hegemonic heritage discourse as a disruption of what is considered common or traditional.

It is essential to foster critical thinking in children from a very young age through education. In the case of early childhood education, notable works include “Playing to Think with 4 to 5-Year-Old Boys and Girls”, inspired by Matthew Lipman’s philosophy for children [41]. These authors propose activities to develop perception, investigation, conceptualisation, reasoning, and translation skills in young children. If these skills are applied to the study of heritage, they can contribute to the development of historical and critical thinking in children at this educational stage.

The potential synergies between historical education and heritage education have been pointed out by various authors [42–45]. However, their application in early childhood education is still not widespread [46]. Some studies have indicated that pre-service early childhood education teachers have a limited view of heritage, mainly focused on tangible elements and with little connection to the present [45,47].

1.4. Hypotheses and Objectives of the Research

Considering the state of the art, this study is based on two hypotheses. The first is that future early childhood education teachers have limited knowledge of cultural heritage and the potential of heritage education from a critical teaching model. The second is that this limited knowledge can be reversed through didactic proposals developed by working with relevant social problems related to cultural heritage. Therefore, the present study aimed to achieve the following objectives: (1) to investigate the perceptions of cultural heritage among pre-service early childhood education teachers; and (2) to analyse changes and continuities in their perceptions after carrying out a didactic proposal focused on relevant social problems linked to the *Ribeira Sacra* landscape.

Among the main conclusions of the study, the limited knowledge of future early childhood education teachers regarding cultural heritage and its educational function stands out. Additionally, it was found that after engaging in didactic activities related to social problems linked to the *Ribeira Sacra*, the students improved their knowledge of cultural heritage but still maintained a conservative view of heritage education.

Next, the article is structured into the following sections: Section 2 describes the methodological approach of the study, explains the design of the case study under investigation, and presents the data collection process. Section 3 presents the results divided into three subsections, which gather the students’ perceptions on the meaning of cultural heritage, its conservation, transmission, and management, as well as their perceptions about heritage education and its relationship with citizenship education. Section 4 provides a discussion of the results, and Section 5 summarises the main conclusions, including the contribution of this study and future lines of research.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is framed within the action research method, understanding it as self-reflection on the social actions and situations experienced by the teaching staff, which allows them to identify their practical problems and take action to resolve them [48]. Action research is considered a critical science that enables the improvement of rationality and justice in social or educational practices, in the participants' understanding (teachers, students, principals, etc.) of these practices, and in the social context in which they take place (classrooms, schools, etc.) [49].

The socio-critical paradigm serves as a reference point, aiming to foster critical thinking and social action [50]. The objective was to have the students perform a self-analysis of their perceptions about cultural heritage, and after completing didactic activities, they were expected to reflect on and decide whether they wanted to maintain or change them. Additionally, the results were intended to help the teaching staff implement actions aimed at improving the training of future early childhood education teachers in the field of critical heritage education.

Furthermore, the case study approach [51] was selected, a method of great relevance in educational research [52]. Specifically, an exploratory case study was conducted using inductive reasoning, allowing the discovery of relationships and concepts in the context under study, comparing them with others, and designing a strategy for action and change [50,53].

2.1. Action Research Case Study

The case study subject of the action research is a sample of 56 third-year students from the Early Childhood Education Degree at the Faculty of Education Sciences of the University of A Coruña (Galicia, Spain). It was conducted during the months of October and November 2021 as part of the mandatory course "Social and Cultural Environment and its Didactics", with the aim of helping the students understand the role of cultural heritage in society and in the educational field. Over eight weeks, students participated in three didactic activities in groups of four to five members, which were presented orally in class. Furthermore, theoretical classes covered specific content on the evolution of the meaning of cultural heritage, heritagisation and de-heritagisation, and the economic issues associated with them, among others.

The first practical activity, spanning two weeks, focused on reflecting on social problems such as discrimination, violence, unemployment, ageing, hunger, environmental pollution, and war, based on various sources of information (news, scientific articles, statistical reports, etc.). The second activity aimed to teach a set of thinking skills and how to develop them in children in early childhood education. To achieve this, students studied the book "Playing to Think with 4 to 5-year-olds" [41] for two weeks. These two prior activities served as a foundation for the main activity, where students applied their theoretical knowledge to design a didactic proposal for early childhood education using a specific case, the *Ribeira Sacra*. What is *Ribeira Sacra*, and why was it chosen?

Ribeira Sacra is located in the northwest of Spain, in the Autonomous Community of Galicia. It is a cultural landscape with a geomorphological substrate of river valleys situated in a heavily humanised territory, both in the past and present (Figure 1) [54]. This landscape includes ancient fortified settlements on elevated positions, Roman infrastructures for gold mining, religious communities with foundations dating back to the 6th century and onwards, centuries-old paths like the Winter Route of St. James, terraces formed along riverbanks for wine cultivation, as well as more recent infrastructures for energy production using the power of water and wind [55].



Figure 1. Ribeira Sacra landscapes. Source: Yamilé Pérez-Guilarte (October 2021).

Ribeira Sacra was declared a Cultural Heritage Site by the Autonomous Community of Galicia in 2018, recognising the singular cultural value of its tangible and intangible elements resulting from the interaction between nature and humans. In 2019, part of this region was included in the Global Geopark List by UNESCO (Courel Mountains). Subsequently, in 2021, it was declared part of the Biosphere Reserve (*Ribeira Sacra e Serras do Oribio e Courel Biosphere Reserve*). *Ribeira Sacra* has been on Spain's World Heritage Tentative List since 1996.

The use of the *Ribeira Sacra* to carry out the educational activity is justified due to its high didactic potential for promoting heritage education and citizenship education. On the one hand, it is a place of great cultural heritage richness that combines natural, cultural, and historical values. This allows the exploration of intangible elements such as traditional crafts, place names, festivals, legends, lifestyles, or dialectal variants of the Galician language. Furthermore, it allows an approach to the diverse physical elements of the territory, from mountains, rivers, and vegetation to historical elements and the results of land occupation processes such as monuments, viewpoints, dams, bridges, boats, etc. It is of great interest for students to critically analyse how different groups use this space, the economic activities that take place, and their social and environmental impact. In essence, it is an ideal framework for reflecting on current problems and how to address them through the study of the interaction between territories and the communities that inhabit them, as well as the factors that have conditioned this interaction throughout history.

2.2. Data Collection Technique

For data collection, a questionnaire was used, which is widely employed in social and educational research, especially for exploring people's perceptions [56]. The questionnaire was completed by the students before conducting the didactic activities, allowing for an understanding of their initial perceptions about cultural heritage, heritage education, and citizenship education. After the didactic activities were concluded, the students answered the same questionnaire, enabling the analysis of perceptions that had changed and those that had remained unchanged.

The questionnaire proposed by Pérez-Guilarte [57] and Pérez-Guilarte and González-Monfort [58] for a similar study with students from the Primary Education Degree was employed. The questionnaire consists of eight questions and is structured into three sections (Table 1). The first section aims to investigate perceptions about cultural heritage and comprises three questions. The first question was open-ended, and students were asked to name ten terms they associate with cultural heritage. In the second question, they were asked to identify whether eight images represented heritage or not. The images included both tangible elements—a cathedral, a park, a *Ribeira Sacra* landscape, a Way of Saint James landscape—and intangible elements—Galician language, Galician toponyms, traditional craft, and traditional festivity. The third question was open-ended, where they were asked to define the concept of intangible cultural heritage.

Table 1. Sections and Questions of the Questionnaire.

Section	Questions
Perceptions on Cultural Heritage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write down 10 words related to the term “cultural heritage”. 2. Respond whether you associate this image with the term “cultural heritage”. 3. Define in your own words what intangible cultural heritage is.
Conservation, Transmission, and Management of Cultural Heritage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Who is responsible for the conservation, valorisation, and transmission of cultural heritage? (Select the three you consider most important). 5. The conservation of cultural heritage requires investment. Indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Heritage assets should be used for economic development. - Tourism is an activity that ensures the preservation of heritage. - <i>Ribeira Sacra</i> is a source of economic resources and income that must be conserved. - Mass tourism in <i>Ribeira Sacra</i> leads to the loss of its values. - The presence of anthropic elements in <i>Ribeira Sacra</i> leads to the loss of its values.
Heritage Education and Citizenship Education	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. What personal memories do you have of using heritage in the classroom when you were in school? 7. Select the essential didactic purpose of heritage education for early childhood education: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding the sources of past and present events and recognising historical and social models and their characteristics. - Reading reality to avoid manipulation, questioning what is said about history and society, and constructing one's interpretation. - Understanding who and how we are helps us become aware of our identity. - Valuing the present means understanding how we got here, the actions taken, and their consequences. 8. How do you relate heritage education to citizenship education?

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of two questions. The first was of multiple-choice nominal type, and students were asked to select the agents responsible for conserving, transmitting, and managing cultural heritage, choosing three from the following options: citizens, schools, governments, civic and cultural associations, and UNESCO. The second question in this section was metric, using a 6-point Likert scale. Students had to indicate their level of agreement (completely, quite, slightly) or disagreement (completely,

quite, slightly) on five issues related to the economic use of heritage and its impact on the loss of its values (Table 1).

The third section aimed to understand students' perceptions about the role of heritage education and citizenship education. The first question was open-ended, asking students to indicate their memories of the didactic use of heritage in their schools. The second question was of the single-choice nominal type. Students had to choose one out of four options regarding the essential purpose of heritage education they considered important for early childhood education. These purposes were adapted from Benejam [59], ranging from critical and transformative education to traditional education. Lastly, through an open-ended question, students had to explain the relationship they saw between heritage education and citizenship education.

The questionnaire was designed using Google Forms. For the processing of the 112 questionnaires (initial and final), the statistical software MAXQDA was used, and a descriptive analysis was conducted using frequencies and percentages. Additionally, a cross-tabulation and Pearson's chi-square test were performed to delve into the study of the relationship between heritage education and citizenship education. Regarding the open-ended questions, a Thematic Content Analysis [60] was carried out by establishing the categories that are explained in the Section 3.

3. Results

Next, the results obtained in the initial and final questionnaires are compared for each of their sections, allowing us to observe the aspects that changed and those that remained unchanged. In the case of open-ended questions, the results are accompanied by testimonies from the students. These are introduced in the analysis using the initials IC or FC to refer to the initial or final questionnaire, respectively. Additionally, the numbers 1 to 56 are used, corresponding to the number assigned to each student by the MAXQDA programme.

3.1. Perceptions of Cultural Heritage

The terms that students most commonly associate with cultural heritage are listed in Table 2. "Culture" was the most frequently mentioned term, both in the initial and final questionnaires. Out of the 10 terms, eight remained the same (heritage, assets, history, monuments, society, tradition, and art), although some changed positions. However, "wealth" and "property" were replaced by "material" and "intangible". In the initial questionnaire, the perception of heritage was associated with fortune and wealth. Thus, terms related to this meaning appeared, including capital, wealth, fortune, money, savings, and earnings. In the final questionnaire, this perspective lost weight, and students also recognised the relevance of intangible elements, which were largely overlooked in the initial questionnaire.

Table 2. Results of the 10 terms most associated with cultural heritage.

Initial Questionnaire	%	Final Questionnaire	%
Culture	85.7	Culture	81.5
Legacy	44.6	Tradition	48.2
Assets	42.9	Material	33.3
History	33.9	Monuments	37.0
Monuments	30.4	Intangible	35.2
Wealth	28.6	History	33.3
Property	26.8	Legacy	27.8
Society	26.8	Assets	25.9
Tradition	26.8	Art	20.4
Art	25.0	Society	20.4

Regarding intangible heritage, it is highly noteworthy that in a region with such rich toponymic and linguistic diversity, students did not recognise these elements as heritage. Figure 2 shows how the image related to Galician toponyms was only associated with heritage by 60.7%, and what is even more striking is that after working on it in class, it only increased to 88.9%. In the case of the Galician language, it was successfully recognised by 98.2%, as were traditional Galician crafts. Traditional festivals were the intangible element that was best recognised by the students, reaching 100% in the final questionnaire. On the other hand, tangible elements were better associated with heritage from the beginning, particularly the cathedral, with both the cathedral and the landscape of *Ribeira Sacra* recognised by 100% in the final questionnaire.

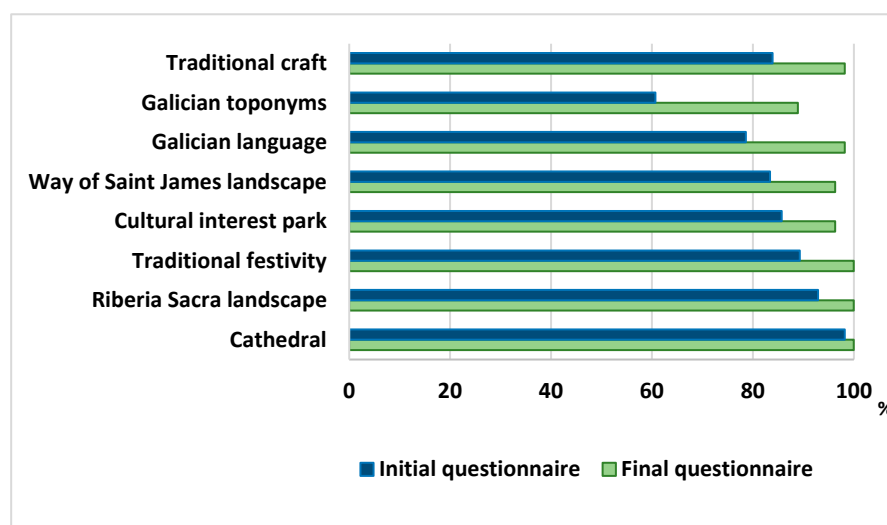


Figure 2. Results of the recognition of cultural heritage through images.

For the analysis of the definitions of intangible cultural heritage, categories were established based on UNESCO's definition of intangible heritage [22], as presented in Table 3. The aspects that stand out the most are the recognition of its intangible nature (42.6%) and the role of intergenerational transmission in its preservation (40.7%). Some responses in this regard were: "It is that which is not tangible; we cannot touch it, but, for example, it could be in an oral form like popular songs" (FC25) and "They are the knowledge or techniques that have been passed down from generation to generation" (IC10). Next, communities and the environment are mentioned, with both being more frequently mentioned in the final questionnaire, although still not exceeding 20% of the students. Although intangible heritage is associated with specific communities or groups, there is little emphasis on their role in deciding whether to voluntarily adopt the legacy and pass it on to future generations. As for the environment, responses are limited to indicating that heritage belongs to a place or a specific territory, and they do not highlight that it results from interactions between the environment and its inhabitants.

Table 3. Results of the definition of intangible cultural heritage.

Categories	Initial Quest. (%)	Final Quest. (%)
Intangible elements	30.3	42.6
Communities, groups, people	10.7	14.8
Feeling of identity	16.1	5.5
Intergenerational transmission	35.7	40.7
History	3.6	3.7
Environment and interaction with nature	12.5	18.5
Cultural diversity and human rights	0	1.8
Inherent tangible elements	0	0

Furthermore, the importance attributed to a sense of identity decreased from 16.1% to 5.5%. It is also remarkable that there was little mention of history, no mentions related to cultural diversity, except for one case in the final questionnaire, nor to respect for human rights or the tangible elements inherent to intangible heritage. Finally, it is interesting to note that 80% of the definitions proposed by the students included only one of these analysed categories, while only 20% included two or three. The most comprehensive definition was: "It would encompass traditions, knowledge, and practises that are passed down over time from generation to generation, promoting a sense of identity among those who experience them and being recognised by the community" (IC33).

3.2. Conservation, Transmission, and Management of Cultural Heritage

Regarding the agents involved in the conservation, valorisation, and transmission of cultural heritage, the prominence given to citizens was strengthened, being recognised by 83.3% of the students in the final questionnaire (Table 4). Similarly, the perception of the school's role improved, increasing from 46.4% to 57.4%. On the other hand, the relevance of national, regional, and local public administrations decreased, as did that of UNESCO and civic and cultural associations, although to a lesser extent.

Table 4. Agents involved in the conservation, transmission, and management of cultural heritage.

Agents	Initial Quest. (%)	Final Quest. (%)
Citizens	78.6	83.3
Galician Government	53.6	44.4
School	46.4	57.4
UNESCO	60.7	48.1
Councils	28.6	22.2
Civic/Cultural Associations	37.5	35.2
Spanish Government	23.3	5.5

Figure 3 shows the percentage of students who agreed (completely, quite, or slightly) with the presented aspects. The perception that heritage should be used for economic development was initially expressed by 42.9% of the students, decreasing to 29.6% in the final questionnaire. In this sense, the students became aware that it is not just an economic issue but that it is important to consider the impact that activities such as tourism can have on the conservation of cultural heritage. Thus, while initially 76.8% believed that tourism guaranteed the preservation of heritage, this figure dropped to 53.7% in the final questionnaire.

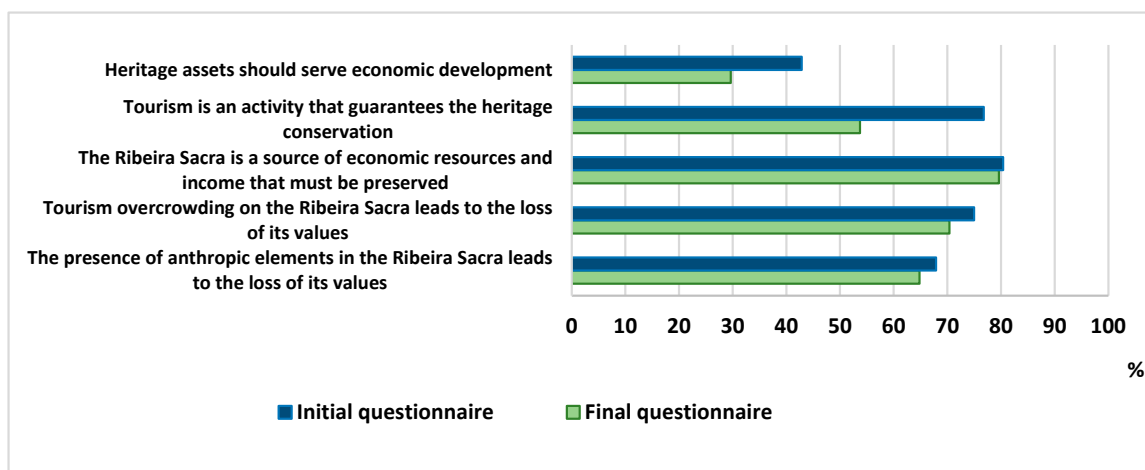


Figure 3. Aspects related to the conservation and management of cultural heritage.

However, the result is interesting when it comes to the specific case of Ribeira Sacra, an area close to and familiar to the students. Although they recognised from the beginning that it is a source of economic income that should be maintained (80.4%), they also pointed out (75%) that mass tourism or, in general, anthropic factors lead to the loss of its value.

3.3. Heritage Education and Citizenship Education

Regarding the memories that the students had about the use of cultural heritage during their school years, it stands out that 16% of them acknowledged having no memories of heritage education in any of their school stages. This figure was reduced to 2% in the final questionnaire, indicating that once the topic was studied, students recognised some aspects that they initially did not associate with cultural heritage. Excursions to the surroundings were the most mentioned element (around 30% in both questionnaires), with visits to museums, monuments, historical centres, or natural spaces being highlighted.

It is worth noting that the responses in the final questionnaire were more reflective. In some instances, students specified whether the elements discussed in class were tangible or intangible heritage. For example, “We did work on festivities considered intangible heritage, like the carnival, but we never used the term heritage” (FC38). Additionally, elements such as language and traditional crafts were mentioned that were not initially brought up.

As the second issue in this section, the results regarding the choice of the purpose of heritage education considered indispensable by the students are analysed. As previously noted, the approach comprised a single-choice nominal question drawn from Benejam’s research [59], covering a spectrum from critical and transformative education to traditional education. Within this framework, Table 5 showcases the spectrum of proposed purposes, encompassing the most critical (Purpose A) to the more traditional (Purpose D). Purpose A represents the most critical and transformative education, teaching students to question facts, contrast sources of information, and build their own interpretation. The percentage of students who selected Purpose A, the more critical one, increased from 5.3% to 29.6%. Similarly, the percentage of uncritical students decreased by 10.3 percentage points. However, an analysis is presented below to allow for a more nuanced understanding of this result through a cross-tabulation of variables.

Table 5. Selection of indispensable didactic purpose of heritage education.

	Purpose	Initial Quest. (%)	Final Quest. (%)
A	To read reality so as not to be manipulated, so that what is said about history and society is questioned, and one can build their own interpretation.	5.3	29.6
B	To evaluate the present, how we have gotten here, the actions that have been conducted, and the consequences.	21.3	22.2
C	To understand who and how we are so that we are aware of our identity.	46.4	31.5
D	To know the sources of the past and the facts of the present and to recognise the historical and social models and their characteristics.	27.0	16.7

Lastly, the explanation of the relationship between heritage education and education for citizenship was one of the significant challenges for the students. This result is crucial as it was gathered through an open-ended question, which allowed for verification of whether the students were able to reason critically on this matter. Both in the initial and final questionnaires, a vision of heritage education oriented towards the need to be “good citizens” and to care for and preserve cultural heritage predominated. In the

initial questionnaire, 96% of students expressed this view, which decreased to 79.6% in the final questionnaire. Some illustrative responses are: “For me, they are closely related because citizenship education educates in respect for everything and everyone, and heritage education educates in respect for our heritage” (FC5); “Heritage education and citizenship education must work together with the objective of preserving the valuable heritage we have as citizens” (FC8); or “Respect and care for both the environment and other people are essential for being a good citizen, but also for knowing, respecting, caring for, and valuing our heritage” (FC40).

However, issues related to citizen participation in decision-making for the conservation, transmission, and management of heritage elements or questioning the imposition of identity elements that exclude certain social groups were scarcely mentioned. In the initial questionnaire, only 4% of students had a critical view in this regard, while in the final questionnaire, although it increased to 20.4%, it still remains a minority proportion of the participating students. Some responses in this context were: “Heritage education and citizenship education are related through the education of values, democratic culture, and the act of teaching students to think critically and reflectively, questioning everything around us” (FC42); “When we educate for citizenship, we teach values to avoid attitudes like racism or discrimination. When these attitudes are present in a society, many members of it are not respected” (FC53); or “Through past events, we understand how to improve, behaviours to avoid, like racism, classism. . . because we think that sometimes many of the built heritage elements refer to situations where workers were oppressed or repressed, poor. . .” (FC31).

A cross-tabulation was also carried out between the responses in the final questionnaire to the two previous questions to perform a double verification (Table 6). This allowed for the identification of the most critical group of students, those who selected Purpose A and were able to explain its relationship with education for citizenship from a critical perspective (11.1%). The least critical students were also identified as those who chose Purpose D and could not establish the relationship between heritage education and education for citizenship (16.7%). Between these two extremes, five groups of students were categorised. On the one hand, there were the uncritical students, with 18.5% of them recognising at least Purpose A, making them the least uncritical ones. Following were the 20.4% who selected Purpose B, and finally, the 24.1% who chose Purpose C, closely approaching the most uncritical students. On the other hand, among the critical students, none chose Purpose D. However, 7.4% selected Purpose C, being the least critical among the critical students, and 1.9% selected Purpose B, approaching the most critical ones.

Table 6. Cross Tabulation and Pearson Chi-square test.

Purpose	Acritical Students (%)	Critical Students (%)	Total (%)	Bilateral Asymptotic Signific. (<i>p</i>)
Purpose A	18.5	11.1	29.6	0.0948
Purpose B	20.4	1.9	22.2	
Purpose C	24.1	7.4	31.5	
Purpose D	16.7	0.0	16.7	

This analysis proved useful in visualising the inconsistencies that students had in understanding the purposes of heritage education from a critical perspective. As shown by the significance value in Table 6 ($p = 0.0948$), a statistically significant relationship between these two analysed variables cannot be established. Therefore, the difficulties of future early childhood education teachers in recognising the role of cultural heritage in shaping citizens capable of critically addressing the challenges of modern society are demonstrated.

4. Discussion

The research has highlighted the perceptions of cultural heritage held by students of the Early Childhood Education Degree and whether these perceptions have changed after engaging in practical activities focused on the specific case of the *Ribeira Sacra*. Initially, the students' perceptions were more oriented toward tangible elements of cultural heritage, neglecting the intangible ones. This result confirms the lack of visibility of intangible heritage among the general population [61–63], as well as within the educational context [45,47,57].

Significantly, at the beginning of the research, when discussing heritage, the students did not mention elements such as the Galician language, music, dance, traditional artisan techniques, traditional games, or Galician toponymy. The lack of recognition of Galician toponymy is particularly alarming, as only 60.7% of the students considered it part of the cultural heritage, in contrast to the 98.2% who identified the cathedral as heritage. This result is similar to that obtained by Pérez-Guilarte [57] for primary education students, where only 61.5% indicated that toponyms were heritage, compared to 100% for the cathedral. Likewise, Moreno-Vera et al. [45] found that 88.4% of the early childhood education students recognised castles, churches, monuments, or buildings as heritage, while 53.8% did not consider traditional agricultural jobs as such.

The lack of knowledge about intangible heritage became evident when students were asked to provide a definition of it. Although they acknowledged that it is transmitted from generation to generation, they did not explicitly mention that it is the communities that voluntarily accept this legacy and decide whether they want to transmit it or not. They also did not perceive intangible heritage as a result of interactions between communities and the environment, nature, history, or respect for cultural diversity, as reflected in the UNESCO definition [22].

This limited visibility of intangible elements is consistent with the students' perceptions regarding the use of heritage in schools. It is noteworthy that, in some cases, they did not even remember having used it. Those who had recollections mentioned that excursions to various places, such as museums, monuments, historical centres, or natural spaces, prevailed. Although they mentioned engaging in activities related to Galician traditional festivities, they did not use the term "intangible heritage" to refer to them. This can be understood considering the scarce presence of intangible heritage in the curricular legislation governing education in the Autonomous Community of Galicia at all educational levels. These perceptions align with the findings of Santisteban et al. [40], who indicated that educational centres do not pay enough attention to the legacy linked to everyday life, cuisine, plant cultivation, popular traditions, and oral culture, among others.

Despite the initial focus on material heritage, the development of an educational practice based on the *Ribeira Sacra* allowed the students to undergo a process of critical reflection, leading to a greater presence of intangible elements, such as language or toponymy, in their final perceptions. They also enhanced their acknowledgment of citizens and schools within the processes of preserving, transmitting, and managing cultural heritage while diminishing the prominence of national, regional, and local governments. Furthermore, they became more reflective regarding the excessive commodification of heritage and its potential impact on the loss of its values. This transformation was facilitated by addressing issues related to the *Ribeira Sacra*, such as the impact of mass tourism, the loss of traditional artisan techniques or legends, and the translation of toponyms, among others.

These results confirm the necessity, as pointed out by González-Monfort [1], of promoting heritage education by addressing contemporary controversial issues related to the environment. Guillén-Peñafiel et al. [64] also support this idea in their study on intangible heritage in the Dehesa landscape (Extremadura, Spain), where education is considered the main strategy to mitigate or reverse the progressive extinction of ancestral agricultural practices.

However, it is worth noting that even after engaging in didactic activities, a significant proportion of the students maintain a vision of heritage education focused on being "good citizens" and conserving heritage, corresponding to Westheimer and Kahne's category

of personally responsible citizens [65]. Issues related to citizen participation in decision-making processes for preserving, transmitting, and managing heritage or questioning the imposition of identity elements that exclude certain social groups continue to be absent. Only 11.1% of the students chose the purpose of critical and transformative heritage education and explained its relationship with citizenship education from a critical perspective. This small group would correspond to justice-oriented citizens [65]. In Pérez-Guilarte and González-Monfort's [58] study of primary education students and the practise of the Way of Saint James, this group increased to 21.1%.

It is essential for education to contribute to the development of citizens' critical thinking by encouraging them to question facts, compare sources of information, and construct their own interpretations to motivate social action. For early childhood education teachers, this constitutes an even greater challenge. Despite the importance of introducing this critical perspective from an early age, early childhood education has remained on the margins of promoting critical literacy, addressing living social issues, or introducing historical content [45].

5. Conclusions

From an educational perspective, the didactic potential of cultural heritage can be leveraged to educate citizens who are critical and committed to the challenges of today's society. It is particularly relevant for this approach to begin at an early age, making it essential for early childhood education teachers to be trained in this area.

This investigation has confirmed the veracity of the first starting hypothesis: pre-service early childhood education teachers have limited knowledge about cultural heritage and its educational role. While this finding was predictable, as it had been shown in other studies [45,47], the main contribution of this action research study is to advance knowledge to address this situation. To achieve this, an intervention proposal was designed in the classroom, using didactic activities focused on understanding current social problems, developing thinking skills, and exploring didactic potentials through the specific case of the cultural landscape of *Ribeira Sacra*. The results show that students improved their knowledge of the meaning of cultural heritage, the role of social actors, and the processes of preserving, transmitting, and managing cultural heritage. However, the second hypothesis is only partially confirmed, as it is evident that the conservative vision of heritage education is deeply ingrained in the students, and it persists in many of them even after engaging in didactic activities.

Since this constituted an action research study, the outcomes were analysed by the teaching staff in charge of the subject, and proposals were implemented in the subsequent academic year with the aim of promoting students' skills in critical heritage education. Among the proposals, the use of other cultural landscapes as resources was included, not only from Spain but also from other places around the world, to establish similarities and differences and to connect heritage education with global citizenship education. Considering that cultural landscapes embrace a multitude of heritage elements, spanning both tangible and intangible aspects, this study leveraged their didactic capacities to cultivate critical education in the initial training of early childhood education students. To achieve this critical perspective in education, the utilisation of cultural heritage as a historical source becomes essential. This enables the understanding of the past while contributing to the interpretation of the present, comprehending the causes and consequences of current issues, and, above all, seeking solutions.

As Walsh asserted [18], the natural interest in the past should be used as a kind of preface to a more critical engagement with it and its connections to, or dependence on, the present. Following this perspective, we believe that the didactic use of cultural heritage can stimulate students to undertake a comprehensive analysis of how historical antecedents influence and interact with contemporary realities. This prompts a scholarly inquiry into the underlying intentions of events. Furthermore, it serves as a way of encouraging students to develop the skill of critically assessing information gathered from

a variety of sources. This empowers them to construct their own interpretations based on insights drawn from diverse perspectives. However, it is important to mention that the effective use of cultural heritage as a didactic tool for fostering critical education requires a comprehensive exploration within the context of specific topics closely intertwined with its significance and roles in society.

The results of this research should be understood within the specific context in which it was conducted. While acknowledging the limitations associated with the small sample size, these findings still yield valuable insights that have the potential for broader applications within the domain of early childhood education teacher training. While future investigations should consider expanding the sample size, the insights gained from this study remain pertinent and can offer valuable guidance to inform similar initiatives in the field. From our perspective, this study makes a meaningful contribution to the trajectory of future research and points toward promising pathways for enriching the assimilation of cultural heritage into teacher education. Furthermore, future research could delve into studying resources and methodologies involving other heritage assets to foster the critical thinking of pre-service early childhood education teachers and enhance their abilities to design critical didactic proposals.

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