

Cultural Education: A Strategy for Fostering Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity in Early Childhood Education

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20324995>

Abstract

This paper examines strategic measures of promoting equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in terms of cultural education. With the growing multiculturalism of societies, early learning environments need to embrace and support the multiplicity of all learners. Culturally responsive education is an effective strategy to enhance social justice, and break stereotypes and create empathy from an early age. The paper adopts a qualitative design through the review of current literature and best practices to determine how cultural education can be used to promote the inclusion of pedagogical practices in the early childhood context in Nigeria. The main strategies discussed are the incorporation of multicultural materials into the flow of everyday learning, the cultural competence of teachers, collaboration with families and communities, and identity-safe classrooms. The paper finds that cultural education facilitates the growth of both academic and emotional abilities as well as helps to break inequities in the early learning systems and proposes strategies for educators, administrators and policymakers to integrate equity and inclusion in the early learning systems. These measures are in line with international educational objectives which support the idea of inclusive and quality education to all children irrespective of their background.

Keywords: Cultural Education, Equity, Diversity, Inclusivity, Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Cultural education is a complex phenomenon that implies the skills of teachers and learning institutions to appreciate, learn, and act appropriately in response to diverse cultural orientations and identities of students, families, and cultures with which they deal. It entails the establishment

of inviting learning conditions where everyone feels appreciated, respected, and empowered to achieve success without biases on their cultural heritage and background (Eden and Onyebuchi, 2024). The need to ensure access to inclusive and equitable quality education and the need to promote life-long learning opportunities are the objectives of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 4 (United Nations, 2023). This objective is paramount in improving equity, diversity and inclusiveness in the early childhood education. In Nigeria, the principles of equity, diversity and inclusiveness are considered to play the dominant role in ensuring a learning environment that is inclusive for all children.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) in early childhood education play a critical role in achieving an equitable and conducive learning environment that reflects the diverse strands of society. Being an important stage of development, early childhood is the time when the core attitudes to diversity are developed, and it is necessary to ensure that differences are promoted and accepted in educational practices and the curricula. Cultural education will also help educators to provide a more inclusive and enjoyable learning experience that will legitimize and affirm the individual background and identity of every child. This not only boosts self-esteem at an individual level but also leads to social cohesion and social understanding among young learners (Atroszko et al.2020). In Nigeria, efforts to offer all children equal opportunities to flourish and develop regardless of their background or circumstances are the notion of equity that plays an essential role in a beneficial promotion of just and sufficient society, which enables all the children to achieve their potentials (Obafemi et al., 2023). Diversity is a term used to refer to the difference between individuals as they are one way or another: through their racial or ethnicity, cultural beliefs, religious, linguistic skills, and on the socioeconomic status (De Bruin, 2019). Conversely, inclusivity is defined as an act of making the environment friendly and encouraging, appreciating and honorable of diversity, and allowing all children irrespective of their background to engage in learning processes and programs completely (Eden and Onyebuchi 2024).

Papadakis et al., (2021) also confirmed that early childhood education has been revealed as a necessary time that promotes diversity and inclusion. The reason is that at this age, children generate attitudes and beliefs towards themselves and other people that may remain throughout their lives (Hudson and Montelpare, 2021). The earlier the young children are provided an opportunity to learn about diverse societies, languages, and perspectives, the higher the chances that the young child cultivates an open mind and understanding of others (Ferri et al., 2020). The

children will obtain good social skills and have a predisposition to succeed in education and consequently in life if education is properly rooted through the culture of the society (Trigueros et al, 2020). Based on the above background the paper considers the cultural education as a way of promoting equity, diversity and inclusivity in Early Childhood Education.

Cultural Education

Cultural education is one of the approaches that integrate children's cultural backgrounds and worldviews in the pedagogy. Also, it is an inclusive practice which is founded on culturally relevant pedagogy. Paris and Alim (2020) also state that a change to the idea of culturally sustaining pedagogy not only promote representation of various cultures but also maintains and provide them with a nurturing environment in the context of education. Cultural education is supposed to spread the vision of understanding, respect and cooperation among the people of diverse cultures so as to create an atmosphere where diversity is embraced instead of being pushed aside. The management and acceptance of diversity in terms of culture is essential to social harmony in such countries as Nigeria where ethnic, linguistic and religious differences are enormous.

Recent research indicates that children exposed to success stories of their cultures in school materials and classroom content receive increased levels of academic interest along with further social-emotional development (Johnson & Costanza, 2021). On the other hand, lack of culturally engaging resources may cause alienation and a sense of self-worthlessness (Mitchell and Richards, 2020). The introduction of multicultural books, traditional songs, celebrations, and different language use will create an opening that will promote diversity, acceptance and respect of all cultures in the classroom. These considerations and practices cannot be seen as side by side since they are the core of forming identity-safe learning spaces (Clark and Perez, 2023).

In Nigeria, cultural education in early childhood institutions is often embedded in subjects such as social studies, language education, and creative arts. However, despite its significance, the effective implementation of cultural education remains limited due to several structural and contextual challenges. Nigeria's vast cultural diversity presents a major challenge in implementing cultural education. With numerous ethnic groups, traditions, and languages, it is difficult for early childhood educators to represent all cultural perspectives within the curriculum. In many cases, dominant cultures receive greater attention while minority cultures

are underrepresented, which may lead to unequal cultural representation in educational settings (Igbokwe, 2020).

Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity in Early Childhood Education

Equity, diversity and inclusivity are critical concepts in the area of Early Childhood Education (ECE). Equity can also be understood as giving every child opportunity to flourish and develop regardless of children background or circumstances and it is a critical component of ensuring a fair and just society. It enables each child to realize his or her potential. The modern education environment in the early childhood care actively requires diversity, so that students with different cultural backgrounds feel appreciated, honored, and represented (Eden and Onyebuchi, 2024). The concept of inclusivity is a guiding principle that cannot be ignored in the process of providing quality education. It includes identification and appreciation of individual strengths, needs, and identity of every child and the development of a setting which glorifies diversity, and appreciates differences. Regular studies have proven that equity, diversity and inclusivity are critical to providing the quality of early childhood education and guarantee positive outcomes among all children (Souto-Manning, 2019). Children obtain equal access to resources and opportunities which would present a greater likelihood of excelling in education and even in their adulthood (NAEYC, 2019). Inclusive systems create good relationships and encourage the development of social and emotional needs, which is an essential part of the children learning and well-being (Huang, Huang and Liu, 2021). Moreover, facilitating equity, diversity and inclusivity in ECE fosters the appreciation of diversity and trains children to be members of a diverse society (De Lorenzo, 2020).

EDI have become the discussion focus of the education practice and policy. EDI is essential especially in early childhood education where learners are forming social identities and representations of difference and thus making them more tolerant is extremely important (Jones and Nichols, 2021). Researchers believe that equal opportunities to attain high-quality early education are the preconditions of the lifelong learning and prosperity (UNICEF, 2022). This notwithstanding, marginalized racial, ethnic, and linguistic children are usually excluded systemically in the process of enriching the early learning experiences (García and Weiss, 2020).

Besides, the modern classroom is diverse not only in terms of race or language; it consists of gender, religion, socioeconomic status, family structure, and neuro-diversity among others. This diversity should be appreciated and identified as a way or method of fostering empathy, mutual

respect, and lessening bias in early phases (Lee et al., 2023). The idea of inclusive practice, as a part of the ECE, allows each of the children to experience recognition, appreciation, and encouragement in their learning experience (Zhou and Hedges, 2022).

Best Instructional Practices to Sustain a Culturally Responsive Classroom Learning Environment in ECE

Cultural Awareness: Teachers should be able to recognize that in most instances they have to create their own multicultural awareness, attitudes towards the children and their families and knowledge and skills which can be quite important and valuable. In doing so, correct teaching tools such as multicultural literature ought to be distributed in the classroom. Moreover, the multicultural program must include anti-bias and multicultural curriculum and activities that should be properly developed and delivered in the program. Anti-bias curriculum would enable children not only to gain understanding of themselves and but also to respect other people of various gender, ethnicity, races, and backgrounds.

The Different Learning styles of Teaching to Children: learning is different to each child. Educators have to be familiar with the specific learning style of each child in order to be in a position to address the physical, emotional, social, and academic needs of children.

Recruiting Family and Community Involvement: Teachers are expected to offer families and the community regular chances to participate in the activities of the school. School must have good relationship with family and the community.

Supporting and Valuing Every Child: Ideas of valuing individual and respect of human diversity have developed gradually throughout the centuries. Each child must be handled as a personality and children must be allowed to study their own identity and background. (Hammond, 2018)

Plans to promote the EDI in ECE using Cultural Education

Establishing Identity-Safe and Affirmative Classrooms: To establish equity, diversity, and inclusivity in the early childhood educational setting, the establishment of identity-safe classrooms should become the core element. An identity-safe classroom is the place, in which every student feels noticeable, appreciated, and able to feel comfortable expressing themselves (Clark and Perez, 2023). In these places, cultural education does not exist as an isolated phenomenon as how the holiday multiculturalism does, but as a regularity within everyday

relations, the lesson plan, and books. Educators using identity-affirming pedagogy are purposeful in incorporating languages, cultures, and experiential practices of students in the classroom. As an example, welcoming rituals involving greetings in different languages, storytelling, which allows different family structures, and libraries of classes with multicultural literature all help to affirm the identity of children (Mitchell and Richards, 2020). This model works to promote a high degree of belonging which is the basis of engagement and learning.

Inclusive Curriculum Design Curriculum is not objective; it is a statement of values, norms, priorities. Curriculum content should deliberately integrate different points of views and experiences in order to encourage EDI. The cultural education must be moved from Eurocentric curriculum to global, inclusive and highly reflective (Banks and Banks, 2023). In Nigeria, for example, the early childhood programs may incorporate the lessons about cultural festivals, meals, music and traditional attire of various cultures. However, what is more critical is that curriculum developers should include values of equality, compassion and tolerance to diversity. Ideas like fairness, friendship, and inclusion ought to be put in the context that recognizes and praises diversity. Studies indicates that children who enroll to accepting curriculums stand greater chances of becoming inclusive in their attitudes and interacting with others in a constructive way (Lee et al., 2023). This is a long-term effect, which predetermines intercultural competence in later life.

Teacher Training and Reflective Practice: Teachers are not able to adopt inclusive strategies and do not have proper pre-training and follow-up training. To enable teachers to recognize and manage any biases denying them, being aware of culture, and employing methods of anti-bias, it is necessary to provide professional development (Hoffman and Evans, 2022). Cultural competence in-service training programs have yielded positive outcomes. Such training will lead to better confidence of the teachers, positive climate in the classroom, and teacher-student and teacher-family relationships (Nguyen et al., 2023). Furthermore, the teacher reflection, possibly in terms of journaling, peer observation, or coaching, is an effective means of inclusive practice. When teachers discuss their suppositions and pay good attention to the experiences of children, they can more constructively create an inclusive environment that is responsive to every learner.

Teachers are major drivers of inclusivity: Their views, skills, and expertise directly impact implementation processes of EDI principles at school. The definition of cultural competence as a skill that offers an opportunity to learn how to work with representatives of different cultures is a

vital skill that an early childhood educator should have (Hoffman & Evans, 2022). Nonetheless, studies show that most teacher training programs do not have strong training on the same. Self-reflection, bias identification, and culturally responsive practices as the focal point of professional development have been found to enhance teacher efficacy and classroom climate (Morales et al., 2021). Consequently, not only should the educators take a step to examine their own prejudices, but also work to undermine those institutional conventions that underpin inequality. It involves the reconsideration of classroom discipline practices, a new reconsideration of the curriculum content and flexible approaches toward family engagement (Sleeter and Carmona, 2021).

Family and Community Involvement: Primary teachers of a child are their families and their participation in early learning process is a pillar of equity. Nevertheless, in most educational systems, some structures or forms of communication within a family have been favored over others. Cultural education requires redefining the family interactions under a more involving and progressive perspective (Lopez & Baker, 2022). The business of successful EDI can only be supported using significant partnerships with family and community when working in the ECE. Families can introduce important cultural information and experiences that can complement classroom learning and open up the worldview of children.

Involvement of families is another way of getting a more diverse and fair educational process. This consists of providing multilingual communication, providing chances to parents who have a chance to share their cultural knowledge at the classroom and respecting the differences in perspectives towards child development and learning. Community partnerships (including the cooperation with local artists, cultural leaders, and grassroots organizations, etc.) also actively increase the exposure of children to cultural richness and strengthen the message that they should learn together and as a collective (Adebayo and Thompson, 2021). The other impact of community involvement is the improvement of cultural education that involves children in real life experiences and cultural resources. Joint activities like cultural fairs, storytelling with the elders, or field trips around the neighborhood assist children to value the richness of human diversity and at the same time base their learning on the real world setting.

Policy and Structural Support: Smaller-scale teachers can use numerous inclusive techniques but more systemic change is necessary in order to maintain and expand influence. Culturally responsive education should be mandatory and encouraged in national policies about education.

Relying solely on individual initiative is insufficient to facilitate efforts towards a common cause (Smith and Yoon, 2024). In this respect, curriculum policy changes that require the explicit implementation of the culturally responsive and inclusive strategies are the key to lasting change. Consequently, the inclusion of cultural education at the systemic level has to be aided and instructed by curriculum frameworks. Besides that, cultural education should promote equity, diversity, and inclusivity, which means that teachers should be supported with the necessary supportive policies, sufficient funding, and leadership dedicated to the idea of inclusivity.

Conclusion

In the modern, more interconnected and multicultural society, Equity, Diversity and Inclusiveness (EDI) in early childhood education is no longer an ethical concern, but a pedagogical necessity. The childhood is a formative period in which the children learn their identity and cope with the social world they live in. When such foundational are made within the settings where only specific cultures, languages, or even family set-ups are portrayed within the boundaries of where they are valued, it might cause a lifetime gap of differences in education, self-esteem, and societal acceptance.

As this paper has established, cultural education can be used to help in dealing with these challenges. By integrating cultural views and practices into the early childhood environments, teachers would be able to establish identity-safe spaces and appreciate the worth of every child. As demonstrated in the literature, culturally responsive curriculum, cultural competence training of teachers, inclusive and welcoming classroom structure, family involvement, and enabling educational policy plays a paramount role in achieving national cohesion.

Recommendations

As discussed above, the following are the recommendations to educators, policymakers and other stakeholders that would want to enhance equity, diversity and inclusivity in early childhood education using cultural education:

1. The ECE curriculum must have cultural education. Cultural education should not be an optional and festive supplement to curriculum frameworks. It has to be incorporated into every subject and in daily life. The educational authorities ought to expand the early childhood norms to require multicultural teaching materials
2. Continuous professional development on cultural responsiveness, anti-bias education, and equity-centered teaching should be done to all early childhood educators.

3. The learning environments should be safe for children. Children develop well in environments where they feel that their identities are being honored and glorified. Intentional design should be used to create the identity-safe classrooms.
4. Family involvement must be accommodative and sensitive. The schools must also create a mutual relationship with families of every type.
5. EDI metrics should be reflected in early childhood education policies, and the government should measure their implementation and provide inclusion efforts with funding.
6. The schools in the early childhood should offer systems of reflective journals, peer feedback loops, and mentorship programs that promote the increase in inclusive practice

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