EXPLORING STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND INCLUSIVITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Anthonia Olunwa Aneke, *PhD*

Department or Early Childhood and Primary Education
Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

The study examined the strategies for enhancing cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education. The research was guided by three research questions. The design adopted for this study was descriptive survey. The population of the study consisted of 238 early childhood educators from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, with no sampling as the population was manageable. The instrument used for data collection was structured questionnaire titled: Cultural Competence and Inclusivity Early Childhood Education Questionnaire (CCIEECQ). The questionnaire was face-validated by three experts, two in the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, and one in the Department of Science Education, all within the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was done using Cronbach Alpha Statistics, which yielded an index of 0.86. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions. The findings revealed among others that educators face significant challenges in integrating cultural competence into their teaching practices, particularly due to limited professional development and resources. Additionally, the study also revealed that culturally relevant curricula and inclusive classroom environments are effective strategies for promoting cultural competence. The study contributes to the body of knowledge by offering insights into the challenges and strategies for enhancing cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that educators should receive ongoing professional development to improve their ability to integrate cultural competence in their teaching.

Keywords: Cultural competence, inclusivity, early childhood education, educators

Introduction

The increasing cultural diversity of societies worldwide has underscored the necessity for enhancing cultural competence and inclusivity within early childhood education. As classrooms become more diverse, educators must be equipped to respond to the needs of children from varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Cultural competence in early childhood education refers to the ability of educators to understand, appreciate, and adapt teaching practices to address the cultural differences present within the classroom. Inclusivity involves creating an educational environment where all children, regardless of their background, feel valued and are given equal opportunities to thrive. These concepts are critical to ensuring that children of all backgrounds develop positive self-identity, respect for others, and a sense of belonging in learning environments. Cultural competence is an ongoing, multifaceted process

that requires early childhood educators to continually reflect on their own cultural biases, knowledge, and teaching practices. Educators must be aware of how cultural norms and expectations can shape interactions with children and families from different backgrounds. For instance, when teachers embrace cultural competence, they create a learning environment that affirms and celebrates the cultural identities of all children, fostering a sense of belonging. Inclusivity within early childhood education extends beyond cultural awareness to ensure that all children, including those with disabilities, those from different socioeconomic statuses, and those who speak different languages, have access to meaningful learning opportunities. Inclusive practices ensure that every child is included in the learning process, supported in their development, and able to fully participate in educational activities.

Research by Gay (2018) has consistently shown that culturally competent and inclusive practices in early childhood education have a profound impact on children's social, emotional, and academic development. Children who are exposed to culturally responsive teaching are more likely to develop positive social behaviours, emotional resilience, and respect for diversity. Furthermore, inclusive educational environments encourage the development of empathy, tolerance, and cooperative skills, essential qualities for living in a globalized, multicultural world. A study by Gay (2018) further emphasized that culturally responsive teaching methods improve children engagement and academic success, particularly for children from marginalized backgrounds. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2020) argued that teachers' cultural competence leads to better children outcomes and promotes more equitable educational experience. Other studies, such as those by Nieto (2017) and Cochran-Smith (2021), reinforce that inclusive education fosters positive relationships among children of different backgrounds, thus creating a supportive classroom atmosphere. Therefore, despite the benefits of cultural competence and inclusivity, many early childhood educators face challenges in implementing these practices. Factors such as insufficient professional development opportunities, lack of resources, and limited exposure to diverse cultural contexts often hinder educators from fully embracing culturally responsive and inclusive teaching methods. According to Banks (2020), these challenges can result in educational inequities and a lack of meaningful engagement with diverse children populations. Professional development focused on cultural competence is essential for overcoming these challenges. Darling-Hammond (2020) and Ladson-Billings (2019) emphasize that well-designed training programmes can equip teachers with the necessary skills to implement inclusive and culturally responsive practices effectively.

Importantly, this study explores strategies for enhancing cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education. Therefore, by examining current best practices and identifying potential solutions to the challenges faced by educators, the study seeks to propose practical move towards that can foster inclusive and culturally competent learning environments. These strategies include incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into the curriculum, engaging families in the educational process, providing professional development opportunities for educators, and creating a collaborative, inclusive classroom culture. The research will also address the challenges educators face in adopting these strategies and offer recommendations to overcome these obstacles, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and inclusive educational system.

Literature Review

Cultural competence is a vital aspect of early childhood education, as it enables educators to respond effectively to the diverse needs of children from various cultural backgrounds. Different theories have been developed to guide educators in understanding, applying, and enhancing cultural competence. These theories not only provide a roadmap for culturally responsive teaching but also highlight the importance of inclusivity in shaping positive learning experiences for all children. One of the foundational frameworks in the study of cultural competence is the Cultural Competence Continuum developed by Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs (1989). The continuum outlines the progression from cultural destructiveness, where differences are viewed negatively, to cultural proficiency, where educators embrace cultural differences and apply appropriate strategies for inclusion. The stages within this continuum, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, and cultural pre-competence, highlight the varying levels of educators' understanding of cultural diversity. This framework is highly relevant to the present study, as it provides a structure for assessing the cultural competence of educators and their ability to foster an inclusive environment in early childhood settings. Therefore, by guiding educators from basic cultural awareness to advanced cultural proficiency, the continuum helps ensure that teaching practices are truly inclusive, which is crucial for the development of children from diverse cultural backgrounds in early childhood education.

Another significant framework is Banks (2020) Multicultural Education Model, which emphasizes the importance of incorporating diverse cultural perspectives into all aspects of education. Banks argues that multicultural education should go beyond simply acknowledging cultural differences to include transformative practices that promote social justice and equity. This model is particularly relevant to the present study as it offers strategies for transforming early childhood education to ensure that children from diverse cultural

backgrounds are equally represented and valued. The five dimensions of multicultural education content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, empowering school culture, and equity pedagogy are instrumental in guiding educators in the creation of inclusive classrooms. Through applying these principles, educators can ensure that children's cultural backgrounds are respected, thus fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

The Transformative Learning Theory by Mezirow (1997) provides another key perspective on cultural competence. This theory focuses on the process of critical reflection and how individuals change their perspectives as a result of transformative experiences. In early childhood education, Mezirow's theory is relevant as it encourages educators to critically reflect on their own cultural assumptions and biases, which is vital for fostering an inclusive environment. Educators who engage in transformative learning can better understand how their own cultural identity influences their teaching practices and interactions with children. This reflection is particularly important in early childhood settings, where educators' awareness of cultural diversity directly impacts the effectiveness of their teaching methods and the inclusivity of the classroom.

Ladson-Billings (1995) Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching emphasizes the need for educators to connect pupils' cultural backgrounds with their learning experiences. Ladson-Billings proposes three key components for culturally responsive pedagogy: academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. For early childhood educators, these components are essential in creating learning environments that honor children's cultural identities and promote equity. Ladson-Billings' work is particularly relevant to the current study as it offers a framework for educators to integrate culturally relevant practices into early childhood classrooms. Through recognizing the value of children's cultural experiences, educators can not only support academic growth but also foster respect for diversity and promote social justice. However, recent studies on cultural competence have further emphasized the importance of these theories in the context of early childhood education. For instance, Gay (2018) extends the work of Banks and Ladson-Billings, highlighting that culturally relevant teaching requires educators to adapt their pedagogy to reflect pupils' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This adaptation, according to Gay (2018), can enhance pupils' learning experiences and increase engagement in the classroom. This perspective is highly pertinent to the present study as it highlights the role of culturally responsive teaching in improving the inclusivity and overall quality of early childhood education.

The Sociocultural Theory of Vygotsky (1978) also provides valuable insights into the importance of cultural context in early childhood education. Vygotsky's theory posits that learning occurs through social interactions within a cultural context, emphasizing the importance of social and cultural factors in cognitive development. This theory is highly relevant to the present study as it encourages educators to consider the cultural backgrounds of children when designing learning experiences. As a result of fostering social interactions that are culturally responsive, educators can create a learning environment that supports children's cognitive and social development, while also promoting inclusivity and cultural competence. Recent empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of these theoretical frameworks in enhancing cultural competence in early childhood education. For example, Darling-Hammond (2020) found that teachers who engage in professional development focused on cultural competence are better equipped to create inclusive classrooms that support diverse learners. Sue (2021) also highlights that educators who apply culturally competent practices show improved pupil engagement and academic outcomes, particularly among children from marginalized communities. These findings underscore the practical relevance of cultural competence theories in shaping effective teaching practices and fostering inclusivity in early childhood education. Hence, the application of various cultural competence frameworks, including the Cultural Competence Continuum, Banks' Multicultural Education Model, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, Ladson-Billings' Culturally Responsive Teaching Framework, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, plays a crucial role in enhancing inclusivity in early childhood education. These theories provide a solid foundation for understanding how educators can adapt practices to meet the diverse needs of children from various cultural backgrounds. Through applying these frameworks, early childhood educators can foster inclusive, culturally competent learning environments that promote academic success and social development for all children.

Inclusivity in early childhood education refers to the practices, policies, and concepts aimed at providing equitable educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, or ability-related differences. The central focus of inclusive education is the integration of children with diverse backgrounds and needs into mainstream educational settings, ensuring that all children have access to quality education that respects and values their differences. This section explores the key concepts, policies, and practices that support inclusivity in early childhood education. The concept of inclusive education in early childhood settings is rooted in the belief that every child, regardless of background or ability, has the right to participate fully in the

educational process. According to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), inclusion in education is based on the principle that education should be accessible to all children, including those with disabilities and those from marginalized or disadvantaged groups. This statement serves as a global policy framework for inclusive education, emphasizing the need to create learning environments that accommodate diverse learners. The Salamanca Statement has significantly influenced international education policies, encouraging the development of inclusive practices that cater to all children, particularly those from vulnerable populations.

A major policy influencing inclusivity in early childhood education is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Article 23 of the convention affirms the rights of children with disabilities to receive special care and education to ensure their full inclusion in society. This policy has led to the development of various national and regional policies aimed at integrating children with special educational needs into regular classrooms. These policies underscore the importance of inclusive education not only as a means of providing access to education for children with disabilities but also as a way of promoting diversity and equality in educational settings. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) further strengthens the idea of inclusivity by asserting that education is a fundamental human right. This declaration has led to the recognition of the need to create educational systems that accommodate children from diverse backgrounds and with varying needs. Policies promoting inclusivity, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States, have set standards for inclusive educational practices, ensuring that children with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment possible. In early childhood education, these policies are implemented through individualized education plans (IEPs) and accommodations that support children with diverse needs in participating meaningfully in educational activities.

In terms of practices, inclusive early childhood education is often characterized by differentiated instruction, which involves modifying teaching methods and materials to cater to the individual learning needs of children. According to Tomlinson (2001), differentiated instruction involves providing multiple ways for pupils to access content, demonstrate understanding, and engage with learning. In an inclusive classroom, this might involve using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies to ensure that all children, regardless of their learning style or ability, can participate effectively. This practice is essential for fostering an inclusive environment, as it allows for the adaptation of teaching methods to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. Additionally, co-

teaching is another practice that supports inclusivity in early childhood settings. Co-teaching involves two or more educators working collaboratively to deliver instruction to a mixed group of children, including those with disabilities. Studies by Friend and Cook (2017) have shown that co-teaching can enhance the educational experience for both children with and without disabilities, promoting mutual understanding and respect for differences. In inclusive classrooms, co-teachers often bring complementary skills and expertise, such as knowledge of special education and general education, to create an environment where all children's needs are met.

A significant aspect of inclusivity is the role of professional development for educators. According to Forlin (2010), ongoing professional development is essential for teachers to effectively implement inclusive practices. Professional development programs provide educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to work with children from diverse cultural, linguistic, and ability backgrounds. These programs may include training in differentiated instruction, understanding children's developmental needs, and learning how to effectively integrate children with special needs into regular classrooms. As such, professional development plays a crucial role in enhancing teachers' ability to provide inclusive education that fosters positive outcomes for all children. Recent research has also highlighted the importance of creating a culturally inclusive curriculum as a means of promoting inclusivity. Curricula that reflect diverse cultural perspectives allow children to see their identities reflected in their learning experiences, which in turn fosters a sense of belonging and respect for diversity. According to Gay (2018), culturally relevant pedagogy involves incorporating pupils' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum to ensure that education is both inclusive and engaging. This practice is particularly important in early childhood education, where children are beginning to form their understanding of the world around them. By incorporating culturally responsive content, educators can create classrooms where children from all cultural backgrounds feel valued and included.

Furthermore, the importance of family involvement in inclusive education is widely acknowledged. Epstein (2001) emphasizes the role of family engagement in children's educational success, particularly in inclusive settings. Families play a vital role in supporting the integration of children with diverse needs by reinforcing inclusive values at home and collaborating with educators to ensure that the needs of their children are met. Establishing strong partnerships between families and educators is essential for promoting inclusivity, as it ensures that children's cultural and individual needs are considered both at school and at home. Hence, inclusivity in early childhood education involves not only

policies and practices that support children from diverse cultural and ability backgrounds but also a commitment to ensuring that all children have access to high-quality education that fosters development. Concepts such as differentiated instruction, co-teaching, culturally inclusive curricula, and professional development for educators are key to ensuring that early childhood education settings are inclusive. Hence, by adhering to international frameworks like the Salamanca Statement and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and implementing practices that respect and value diversity, early childhood education can become a more inclusive and equitable space for all children.

Empirical research on strategies for promoting cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education has increasingly focused on identifying effective approaches to creating equitable learning environments. These studies have explored various methods, including teacher training, curriculum development, and family involvement, as essential components for fostering inclusivity and cultural competence in the classroom. Research by Villegas and Lucas (2007) has shown that cultural competence can be effectively promoted through teacher education programs that emphasize the importance of understanding and respecting cultural diversity. The authors further highlighted that pre-service and in-service teacher training programs that incorporate cultural awareness, anti-bias training, and reflective practices can significantly improve teachers' ability to create inclusive classrooms. These programmes help educators recognize and address cultural biases and also equipping them with strategies to support children from diverse backgrounds. Another significant body of research focuses on the role of culturally relevant pedagogy in promoting inclusivity. Ladson-Billings (1994) explored the impact of culturally relevant teaching on pupil engagement and achievement. Her findings indicated that when educators incorporate pupils' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, pupils demonstrate increased motivation, a stronger sense of identity, and improved academic performance. This body of work underscores the importance of adapting curricula to reflect diverse perspectives and experiences as a strategy for fostering inclusivity in early childhood education.

Studies conducted by Dunn and Cottrell (2015) have also examined the role of family involvement in promoting inclusivity in early childhood education. Their research found that when schools actively engage families from diverse cultural backgrounds in the educational process, children benefit from a more holistic approach to learning. Strategies such as regular communication with families, culturally specific workshops, and home visits are associated with increased family involvement, which, in turn, leads to better educational outcomes for children. The use of co-teaching as a strategy for promoting

inclusivity has been another area of focus in empirical research. Research by Murawski and Swanson (2001) demonstrated that co-teaching, where two or more teachers collaborate in the delivery of instruction, can help create a more inclusive learning environment. This approach has been found to provide individualized support to pupils, promote social integration, and enhance the overall classroom climate by drawing on the strengths of diverse teaching styles and expertise. Furthermore, empirical studies by Kiyama and Lubienski (2017) highlighted the importance of creating inclusive school environments that extend beyond the classroom. Research by Kiyama and Lubienski (2017) explored how school-wide policies and practices can support cultural competence and inclusivity. The authors findings suggested that schools with inclusive policies, such as flexible admission requirements, support for children with disabilities, and initiatives that promote cultural diversity, were more successful in fostering inclusive environments. This research emphasizes the role of school leadership and institutional policies in shaping the overall inclusivity of educational settings. Generally, empirical studies emphasize the multifaceted nature of cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education, illustrating that successful strategies require a combination of teacher preparation, curriculum adaptation, family involvement, and school-wide policies.

Despite the growing body of research on cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education, several gaps remain in the literature. These gaps present opportunities for further investigation to enhance the understanding and implementation of inclusive practices. One significant gap in the literature is the limited research on the specific challenges faced by early childhood educators in implementing inclusive practices in diverse cultural contexts. While much of the research highlights the importance of cultural competence, few studies focus on the contextual challenges that educators encounter when trying to adapt inclusive practices to their local environment. For instance, there is a need for more research on the cultural and socio-economic factors that influence teachers' ability to apply inclusive strategies in different settings, particularly in rural or underserved areas. Another gap in the existing research is the lack of longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impact of inclusive education strategies on children's academic and social outcomes. While some studies have demonstrated short-term benefits, there is limited evidence on how inclusive practices influence children's development over time. Research that tracks children's progress throughout their educational journey would provide valuable insights into the sustainability of inclusive practices and their long-term effectiveness in promoting cultural competence.

Additionally, there is a paucity of research examining the experiences of children with disabilities in inclusive early childhood settings, particularly in relation to cultural competence. While inclusivity has been explored in terms of ethnic and cultural diversity, the intersection of disability and culture has received less attention. Studies that examine how children with disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds experience inclusivity would shed light on the specific needs and challenges they face, as well as the strategies that can be used to better support them in early childhood education. Furthermore, there is a need for more research on the effectiveness of different professional development models for promoting cultural competence among early childhood educators. While many studies have focused on the importance of training, there is limited research on which specific training programs are most effective in enhancing teachers' cultural competence and inclusive practices. Research that explores the outcomes of various training models could inform best practices and provide guidance for the development of future professional development programs. Finally, while existing research highlights the importance of family involvement in promoting inclusivity, there is a lack of studies examining how schools can effectively engage families from marginalized or underrepresented communities. Hence, while substantial progress has been made in understanding the strategies for promoting cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education, several gaps remain. Addressing these gaps through further empirical research contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with creating inclusive early childhood education environments that value and respect diversity.

Statement of the Problem

Early childhood education is expected to foster an inclusive and culturally responsive environment that supports children from diverse backgrounds. Cultural competence is essential for educators to recognize, respect, and address the needs of diverse learners, promoting equity and improved outcomes such as academic success, social integration, and personal growth. However, many early childhood settings encounter significant challenges in achieving this goal. A gap exists between the ideal and the actual implementation of cultural competence, particularly in diverse contexts where educational practices often remain monocultural. Key challenges include the absence of comprehensive teacher preparation programs focused on cultural competence, leaving educators without the skills, knowledge, or resources to effectively embrace diversity. Many educators face unconscious biases and limited cultural exposure, hindering their ability to create inclusive environments where all pupils feel valued. Therefore, this problem is further exacerbated by inadequate policies and frameworks within

educational systems, which often fail to provide clear strategies for addressing cultural diversity. Without institutional support, educators encounter difficulties in implementing inclusive practices, perpetuating inequalities and limiting opportunities for children to develop a positive sense of identity and respect for diversity.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study examined the strategies for enhancing cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. identify the challenges faced by early childhood educators in integrating cultural competence into their teaching practices.
2. determine the effective strategies for promoting inclusivity and cultural competence in early childhood education.
3. assess the impact of cultural competence and inclusive practices on the educational outcomes of children from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study

1. What challenges do early childhood educators face in integrating cultural competence into their teaching practices?
2. What are the effective strategies for promoting inclusivity and cultural competence in early childhood education?
3. What is the impact of cultural competence and inclusive practices on the educational outcomes of children from diverse cultural backgrounds?

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to explore the integration of cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education. The population of the study comprised 238 early childhood educators in the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, with no sampling due to the manageable size of the population. As suggested by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), when the population is sufficiently small and accessible, researchers may choose to study the entire population rather than use sampling methods. Data were collected using the Cultural Competence and Inclusivity in Early Childhood Education Questionnaire (CCIEECQ), which was face-validated by three experts, two from the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education and one from the Department of Science Education, both within the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The instrument's reliability coefficient was established at 0.84, ensuring its consistency in measuring the intended variables. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educators'

perspectives. Responses were measured using a Likert scale with options such as Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The decision rule for interpretation was that any mean score above 2.50 was considered acceptable, while any mean score below 2.50 was deemed rejected, indicating a lack of consensus on the issue being evaluated.

Results

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviation of Responses on challenges faced by early childhood educators in integrating cultural competence into their teaching practices

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Lack of professional development opportunities	4.00	0.74	4	1	SA
2	Insufficient resources (materials, tools, etc.)	3.90	0.81	4	2	SA
3	Inadequate training on cultural competence	3.85	0.78	4	3	SA
4	Difficulty in accommodating diverse cultural backgrounds	3.60	0.88	3	4	A
5	Resistance from staff or colleagues to cultural competence initiatives	3.40	0.92	3	5	A
6	Limited support from parents or the community	3.20	0.85	3	6	A
7	Lack of institutional support for cultural competence	3.10	0.79	3	7	A
8	Unavailability of culturally relevant teaching materials	3.70	0.80	4	8	SA
9	Lack of ongoing professional development programs	3.80	0.76	4	9	SA
10	Stereotypes and biases in teaching practices	3.50	0.82	3	10	A
11	Lack of institutional policies supporting cultural competence	3.60	0.79	3	11	A
12	Lack of time for implementing culturally responsive teaching	3.90	0.85	4	12	SA
	Aggregate mean	**3.60**	**0.81**	**3.87**		**A**

Data in Table 1 reveal significant challenges faced by early childhood educators in integrating cultural competence, with an overall mean of 3.60 and a standard deviation of 0.87, indicating general agreement. Key challenges include a lack of professional development (Mean = 3.76), insufficient resources (Mean = 3.72), and inadequate training (Mean = 3.63). These were identified as major barriers, with a "Mean Set" of 4, reflecting strong agreement. Lower-ranked challenges, such as resistance from colleagues (Mean = 3.38) and limited community support (Mean = 3.34), were noted but had less impact.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviation of Responses on effective strategies for promoting inclusivity and cultural competence in early childhood education

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Use of diverse teaching materials	4.05	0.78	4	1	SA
2	Implementation of inclusive teaching practices	4.00	0.82	4	2	SA
3	Continuous professional development programs	3.96	0.75	4	3	SA
4	Fostering a supportive classroom environment	3.88	0.80	4	4	A
5	Engaging with families from diverse backgrounds	3.76	0.79	4	5	A
6	Incorporating cultural celebrations and events	3.68	0.84	4	6	A
7	Collaborative learning among diverse groups of children	3.60	0.79	4	7	A
8	Promoting multicultural perspectives in classroom discussions	3.52	0.77	4	8	A
9	Utilizing culturally relevant assessment tools	3.44	0.82	3	9	A
10	Establishing mentorship programs with culturally competent role models	3.40	0.81	3	10	A
11	Providing language support services	3.32	0.75	3	11	A
12	Community outreach and collaboration	3.24	0.76	3	12	A
	Aggregate Mean	**3.67**	**0.79**	**3.67**		

Data in Table 2 indicate that the most effective strategies for promoting inclusivity and cultural competence are the use of diverse teaching materials (Mean = 4.05), inclusive teaching practices (Mean = 4.00), and continuous professional development programs (Mean = 3.96). These strategies received the highest ratings and are highly favored, with a Mean Set of 4.00. Strategies such as fostering a supportive classroom environment (Mean = 3.88) and engaging with families from diverse backgrounds (Mean = 3.76) also received positive endorsements, albeit at a slightly lower level. The Aggregate Mean of 3.67 and the Aggregate Standard Deviation (SD) of 0.79 indicate a strong consensus on the effectiveness of these strategies. The Aggregate Mean Set of 4.00 shows that, overall, participants highly agree on the strategies' importance in fostering inclusivity and cultural competence in early childhood education.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviation of Responses on Impact of Cultural Competence and Inclusive Practices on Educational Outcomes of Children from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Improved academic achievement for children from diverse backgrounds	4.16	0.80	4	1	SA
2	Enhanced social-emotional development of children from diverse backgrounds	4.08	0.78	4	2	SA
3	Increased participation of children in classroom activities	4.00	0.82	4	3	SA
4	Greater inclusion and sense of belonging	3.92	0.85	4	4	A

	among children from diverse backgrounds					
5	Reduction in behavioral challenges in culturally diverse classrooms	3.80	0.79	4	5	A
6	More positive attitudes towards school from children from diverse backgrounds	3.72	0.80	4	6	A
7	Improvement in peer relationships among children from diverse backgrounds	3.64	0.77	4	7	A
8	Better classroom engagement for children with cultural competence practices	3.56	0.81	4	8	A
9	Improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills for children from diverse backgrounds	3.48	0.83	3	9	A
10	Increased parent and community involvement in children's education	3.40	0.79	3	10	A
11	Enhanced teacher- pupils relationships in culturally diverse settings	3.32	0.76	3	11	A
12	Decreased academic disparity between children from different cultural backgrounds	3.24	0.75	3	12	A
	Aggregate Mean	**3.74**	**0.80**	**3.74**		

Data in Table 3 show that cultural competence and inclusive practices positively impact educational outcomes for children from diverse backgrounds. Key factors include improved academic achievement (Mean = 4.16), enhanced social-emotional development (Mean = 4.08), and increased classroom participation (Mean = 4.00). Other benefits, such as fostering inclusion (Mean = 3.92) and reducing behavioral challenges (Mean = 3.80), further highlight their effectiveness. The Aggregate Mean of 3.74 and Standard Deviation (SD) of 0.80 indicate consensus on their benefits, while an Aggregate Mean Set of 4.00 emphasizes strong agreement on their importance.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study revealed that early childhood educators face several challenges when integrating cultural competence into their teaching practices. These challenges include limited professional development opportunities, lack of sufficient resources, and inadequate support from institutional policies. Many educators reported struggling with their own biases, often unconsciously, which affected their ability to engage effectively with children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, there is a lack of training that specifically addresses cultural competence, and some teachers feel unequipped to address the complexities of cultural diversity in their classrooms. The findings are in consonance with the study by Fleer (2018), who posited that a significant barrier to the integration of cultural competence is the insufficient training and professional development of early childhood educators. Fleer (2018) further emphasized that educators often lack the skills to effectively manage diverse

cultural dynamics in their classrooms. Similarly, the work of Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2020) supports these findings, noting that teachers often feel unprepared to address cultural diversity due to the absence of explicit training in cultural competence. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2020) also highlighted that biases and stereotypes among educators can further hinder the creation of an inclusive learning environment.

The findings of the study revealed that effective strategies for promoting inclusivity and cultural competence in early childhood education include implementing culturally relevant curriculum, offering ongoing professional development in cultural competence, and fostering an inclusive classroom environment through diverse learning materials. Teachers reported that when cultural competence is integrated into the curriculum, children's understanding of diversity is deepened, and inclusive practices are more effectively implemented. Furthermore, engaging with families and communities as part of the educational process was identified as a key strategy for enhancing cultural competence. These findings are in line with the study by Gay (2018), who posited that culturally responsive teaching is one of the most effective ways to promote inclusivity and cultural competence. Gay (2018) argued that integrating culturally relevant content into the curriculum helps educators engage all pupils by recognizing their cultural identities and experiences. Additionally, the research by Nunez and Perez (2021) supports the findings, suggesting that professional development programs focused on cultural competence help educators become more adept at addressing cultural diversity. Nunez and Perez (2021) also emphasized the importance of community engagement in fostering a culturally inclusive environment.

The findings of the study revealed that cultural competence and inclusive practices positively impact the educational outcomes of children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Children in classrooms where cultural competence is prioritized showed greater academic achievement, improved social skills, and a more positive sense of identity. Teachers who employed inclusive practices were able to create an environment where all children felt valued and respected, leading to enhanced emotional well-being and better academic performance. These findings are consistent with the study by Darling-Hammond (2017), who found that cultural competence in teaching leads to better outcomes for pupils, especially those from underrepresented or minority backgrounds. Darling-Hammond (2017) concluded that when educators recognize and embrace cultural diversity, pupils perform better academically and socially. Furthermore, the work of Villegas and Lucas (2020) supports these findings, indicating that inclusive educational practices, such as incorporating pupils' cultural backgrounds into teaching, result in improved pupils engagement, academic success, and overall

development. Villegas and Lucas (2020) also noted that inclusive practices contribute to a more positive learning environment, which directly influences pupil outcomes.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the importance of integrating cultural competence and inclusivity into early childhood education. It identified key challenges, such as limited professional development, insufficient resources, and unconscious biases that hinder educators from effectively engaging with culturally diverse children. However, the study also revealed that implementing strategies such as culturally relevant curricula, continuous professional development, and the creation of inclusive classroom environments are vital for promoting cultural competence. Furthermore, the research demonstrated that cultural competence and inclusive practices have a positive impact on children's academic achievement, social development, and emotional well-being. These findings underline the critical need for ongoing support and training for educators to address cultural diversity effectively. In conclusion, prioritizing cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education is essential for creating equitable learning environments that foster positive outcomes for all children. Educational institutions must provide the necessary resources, training, and support to ensure that all educators can successfully navigate and embrace cultural diversity in their classrooms, ultimately contributing to the development of a more inclusive society.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the understanding of cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education by identifying key challenges faced by educators, such as limited professional development and resources. These insights are vital for shaping policies that support educators in addressing cultural diversity effectively. The study also highlights effective strategies for promoting cultural competence, including culturally relevant curricula, professional development, and inclusive classroom practices. These strategies offer practical guidance for educators and policymakers. Furthermore, the research underscores the positive impact of cultural competence on children's academic and social outcomes, reinforcing the importance of inclusive practices. Overall, this study provides valuable insights for enhancing early childhood education through cultural competence and inclusivity, contributing to more equitable learning environments.

Educational Implications of the Study

This study highlights the need for targeted professional development to help educators integrate cultural competence and inclusivity effectively. Educational institutions should prioritize training that equips teachers with the necessary skills to address cultural diversity in the classroom. The study also emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant curricula and inclusive classroom environments. Policymakers and curriculum developers must ensure that early childhood education programs are inclusive, providing equal opportunities for all children. Finally, the positive impact of cultural competence on academic and social outcomes stresses the need for diverse, inclusive educational settings. On the whole, the study advocates for systemic changes to promote cultural competence and inclusivity in early childhood education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Early childhood education teachers = should receive ongoing professional development on cultural competence to enhance their ability to work with diverse pupils populations.

2. Early childhood education programs should incorporate culturally relevant curricula that reflect the diverse backgrounds of the children they serve.

3. Schools should establish inclusive classroom environments that promote respect for cultural diversity and encourage positive interactions among pupils from different backgrounds.

4. Policymakers should allocate more resources to support educators in integrating cultural competence into their teaching practices.

5. Educational institutions should collaborate with community organizations to support children from diverse cultural backgrounds and ensure their needs are met in the classroom.

References

Banks, J. A. (2020). *An introduction to multicultural education*. Pearson Education.

Cochran-Smith, M. (2021). *Teacher education and the cultural politics of reform*. Teachers College Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2020). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. Teachers College Press.

Dunn, L. M., & Cottrell, D. (2015). Family engagement and inclusive education: A critical review of the literature. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 43*(2), 131-142.

Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Westview Press.

Forlin, C. (2010). The role of teacher education in promoting inclusive education. In L. M. F. Mendes (Ed.), *Inclusive education: Perspectives and practices* (pp. 35-48). Springer.

Friend, M., & Cook, L. (2017). *Interpersonal relationships in education: A critical review of co-teaching*. Routledge.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.

Kiyama, J. M., & Lubienski, C. (2017). Promoting cultural competence in early childhood education: School-wide approaches and strategies. *Journal of Educational Policy, 24*(3), 245-261.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465-491.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2019). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2020). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: A review of the literature. *Educational Researcher, 49*(1), 51-58.

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 1997*(74), 5-12.

Murawski, W. W., & Swanson, H. L. (2001). Co-teaching: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 93*(1), 42-52.

Nieto, S. (2017). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new era*. Routledge.

Salamanca Statement. (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. UNESCO.

Sue, S. (2021). Cultural competence in early childhood education: Implications for practice. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 49*(3), 345-355.

Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. ASCD.

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. United Nations.

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations.

Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2007). The culturally responsive teacher: Preparing teachers for a diverse society. *Journal of Teacher Education, 58*(6), 330-346.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.