

The impacts of culture and religious diversity on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners a case of primary schools in Mudzi District of Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study focused on the impacts of culture and religious diversity on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners a case of primary schools in Mudzi District of Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. The main research objectives are; to examine how cultural and religious diversity influence the social development of early childhood learners, to investigate how family and community values related to culture and religion influence early childhood development, to explore potential challenges and barriers faced by early childhood learners in culturally and religiously diverse environment and to analyze the role of educator in supporting early childhood learners from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The study was informed by the Socio-Cultural Theory of Cognitive Development which was postulated by Vygotsky. Several concepts were unpacked in the literature review. This was meant to unpack the mystery behind those concepts hence it will be easy for the local people of the study area to have an in-depth understanding of the hidden concepts. The study used a number of data collection tools which include; the questionnaire, field observation and face-to-face interviews. This was meant to capture a broad spectrum of data which cannot be obtained by using only one tool. From the research findings, it was noted that culture and religion play an important role towards the social development of learners. In addition, there is a close link between family and community values to culture and religion to early childhood development. Early childhood development is associated with a number of barriers which if remain unsolved, young children will face a big challenge in trying to see themselves attaining the desired qualities. In trying to mold the learners with desired qualities, teachers and their administrators should work tirelessly to maintain equity among learners.

Introduction

The essence of culture and religion in the growth of children should not be underestimated. They have a bearing in the way children can interact with their environments. In order to live in harmony in various communities, it is of paramount importance to appreciate our religious and cultural diversity, (Beyer 2017). In multi-cultural societies, it is critical to have an in-depth understanding of how diverse cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs can mold children's learning experiences in their developmental years. Carrol et al (2020) cites that, being a fundamental stage where children can develop foundational skills, attributes and attitudes, the environment which surrounds the learners can either enhance or contest this development hence the children will have a shortfall in their social aspect. Cultural

assortment incorporates differences in linguistic, customs, morals and worldviews even though religious diversity denote to the existence of innumerable religious principles and practices. Mason (2015) posits that, when cultural and religious beliefs are not upheld properly in schools they may impact negatively in learners' the learning processes.

Early Childhood Development education plays a central role which teachers from different educational institutions should pay due diligence towards Socialisation context of Early Childhood Development learners (Gaus 2021). When different children from different cultures come to school in an inclusive classroom we say cultural boarder crossing has occurred since new and diverse cultures would've been brought into the classroom. Hence, the teachers should act as cultural brokers to facilitate appreciation of the

diverse cultures by the different learners in the classrooms and schools. Through the help of competent and sensitivity to religious and cultural differences, teachers should help learners appreciating these differences so that they can be integrated into which ever system hence nurturing a sense of belonging and inclusivity (Nutbrown 2011). Knowledge deficiencies on learners in respect to cultural diversity may culminate into their segregation from schools or pigeonholing.

Research objectives

To examine the impacts of culture and religious diversity on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners a case of primary schools in Mudzi District of Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe, the study was guided by the following objectives.

- (a) To examine how cultural and religious diversity influence the social development of early childhood learners.
- (b) To investigate how family and community values related to culture and religion influence early childhood development.
- (c) To explore potential challenges and barriers faced by early childhood learners in culturally and religiously diverse environment.
- (d) To analyse the role of educator in supporting early childhood learners from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.
- (e) To determine the mitigatory strategies that can address the negative impacts and leverage the benefits of cultural and religious diversity in Early Childhood Development (ECD).

Theoretical framework

This study was informed by the Socio-Cultural Theory of Cognitive Development to show the link between the philosophical perspectives on the impacts of culture and religious diversity on Early Childhood Development and what is transpired in Mudzi District. This theory explains the impact of the world on developmental processes of human beings. The theory posits that, learning is a process through which

development occurs. This is achieved through interaction among the people which enables the diffusion of knowledge and skills the human race. In his theory, Vygotsky believed that people who are surround the child play a central role in the acquisition of the critical life skills of that child. These include but not limited to; parents, friends, teachers, guardians, caregivers and the entire society. Vygotsky further explained that, learning largely depends on individuals form diverse cultures. In this regard, teachers must take into cognisance cultural diversity when attending to their learners. Learners from different cultural

backgrounds must be treated differently though there is a generic approach of attending to the learners' issues.

In relation to this study, the Socio-Cultural Theory of Cognitive Development helps to explain the relationship that exist between the culture and religious diversity on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners. As was intimated by Vygotsky, the social environment can determine the future of every person in the world. There is an assimilation of knowledge from our wider surroundings.

Literature review.

Several concepts have been clarified in a bid to make the study results well understood by the local residents to which the study is being carried out. Moreover, these results will be of essence to the general populace as they translate what is transpired in the study area to their local area. This is so be the problems may simply vary in scale rather than in kind. These concepts include, culture, cultural diversity, religion, religious diversity, early childhood development, the impacts of culture and religious diversity on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners, the influence of cultural and religious diversity the social development of early childhood learners, the link between family and community values to culture and religion on early childhood development, potential challenges and barriers faced by early childhood learners in culturally and religiously diverse environment as well as the role of educator in supporting early childhood learners from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

Key words: Culture, cultural diversity, religion ECD.

Culture

Culture refers to the way in which a group of people live, share their beliefs, values, behaviour and symbols which are passed on to generations (Li and Karakowsky 2011). Isidienu (2014) defines culture as the attributes in human beings or the entire society that comes from what they perceive as exceptionally good in the way they do their things, values, customs, knowledge as well as growth and development. Culture is passed on to generations through communication as well as emulating what other people in the same community are doing. Culture has a bearing in one's life as it shapes people's identities, influence behaviour, as well as affecting how people affect how human beings view the world. In this case, culture impacts on how people interact with each other as well as with other people from different cultures. Culture determines the type of dressing, food as well as the life style.

Cultural diversity

Cultural diversity refers to the situation where there are people different cultures, or ethnic groups which believe in different customs, values, languages, practices, languages and culture (Shen 2024). Each group can view things in its own perspectives hence lacks common grounds with respect to the political, economic and social grounds. In this regard, it might be somehow difficult for some people to coexist in a culturally diverse community. Only those who were exposed to different communities can be able to fit into such environments.

Cultural diversity impacts on human lives in a number of ways which include; broader world view where people will be exposed to different ways of viewing things, which may lead to tolerance and understanding towards others, social cohesion and tension where the people may call for social harmony (Shen 2024). However, misunderstandings can also erupt in such communities which may culminate into civil unrest if not handled properly. Culture and religion always go hand in hand rather than in

isolation. Witte (2001) cites that, culture subsumed in culture.

Religion

Religion refers to beliefs and practices that are based on worshiping the supreme power and centre of authority, for example ancestors, the gods, and the spirits. Religion usually involves codes of conduct and traditional guidelines that must be adhered to by the people who follow a certain religion. If a person breaks such rule and guidelines, he/she will be punished. The punishment may vary from one religion to another. There are many religions in the world which include, Christianity, Oral tradition, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism to list but a few.

Religious diversity

Religious diversity implies the existence of different beliefs, traditions and practices within a society. This entails the coexistence of multiple religions in a single community. Karagiannis (2011) asserts that, religious diversity is associated with multiple problems in many societies which include social tension and conflicts, discrimination and intolerance, misunderstandings and stereotype. In addition, religious diversity can also cause disruption of economic growth and equal right and social equality problems. In this case the minority race in the country and/or a given society will suffer more than their majority counterparts. In some instances, religious diversity can lead to increase in the rate of refugees.

Early Childhood development

Early Childhood Development refers to the cognitive, physical and emotional growth of children of preschool age (Tanfidiyah 2021). Khaironi (2018) posits that, it is the most crucial stage of human development as it lays the key milestone in human development such as acquisition and development of language, mental development as well as emotional regulation. Musyarofah (2017) propounded that the future of children largely depends on this stage. This stage is characterised by the development of cognitive skills which include problem solving skills, thinking skills where the child will be in a position of making decisions. Children at this

stage will develop social skills where they will begin to interact with other. At this stage, children will be in a position to manage their emotions.

The impacts of culture and religious diversity on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners.

Through exposure to multicultural and multi-religious communities, learners can improve their social interactions. They may wish to learn a number of traits from their peers hence they always want an association of some sort hence they can obtain the desired skill, characters and traits from their peers.

Exposure to various cultures and religions enables children to develop problem solving skills. Learners may also deduce diverse ways of handling issues. They also learn to appreciate other cultures (Stockinger 2018). Their communication skills can develop through exposure to different languages. Bilingualism helps learners to understand how other people handle their issues if any problem arises. In this case, learners will have an in-depth understanding of how they should express emotions, ideas and concepts.

Children who are exposed to diverse cultures and religions can develop a sense of self and cultural identity. Stockinger (2018) propounded that, children who are exposed to diverse cultures and religions can adapt to different environments. However, it is difficult to integrate the learners from different cultures and religion. Some of the children can internalise culture and religion of the other cultures hence creating problems at home. In addition, it is very difficult for the teachers to set a standard to follow when teaching multicultural societies. However, a multicultural approach to teaching should be adopted in these current trends. Teachers have to understand cultures of all the learners so that they know how best can they handle every one of them in his/her own way.

Examine how cultural and religious diversity influence the social development of early childhood learners.

Cultural and religious diversity influence the social development of early childhood learners in various ways which include, fostering tolerance and respect to others. Children who interact with peers from different religious and cultural backgrounds can appreciate that diversity is a positive aspect in life where they eventually develop tolerance for others, reduce prejudice as well as perving a favourable environment for everyone (Carroll et al 2020).

Inclusivity in the educational system enables teachers to introduce certain concepts that can encompass all the traditions and religions through music, dressing, food and art, to list but a few. If teachers carefully handle cultural differences in schools, they will help the learners to build a positive social environment which accepts everyone as an important part of the community (Carroll et al 2020). In Zimbabwe the Statutory Instrument 106 2005 (SI 106 Of 2005) denotes that teachers should be posted to teach to their places of origin and also that the if posted elsewhere, the teacher should be vested with the knowledge on culture of the certain society they will be working in.

However, there are some situations where some learners who are not very influential will be exposed to stereotype. This can result into labeling and some being rejected by their peers. In addition, conflicts may erupt in the class since some may undermine others' religion and culture. This can be largely influenced by the teachings they obtain from their homes. Hence, parents should nowadays be informed about the multicultural settings we now have in schools.

To investigate how family and community values related to culture and religion influence early childhood development.

Families impact largely to the Early Childhood Development learners through teaching their children to cope with difficulties as well as be resilient whenever they encounter setbacks in their lives. The Ecological Systems Theory supports this notion as it says family environment shapes the development of the child from early stages. At community level, there certain programmes that can be done which include, awareness programmes which reinforce their culture and religion (The Community Development Authority, UAE (2021). In this

respect, such communities which are conscientized by the elders of the clan are very difficult if not impossible to change their minds. In this case, learners from these backgrounds will be difficult to work with.

In schools which integrate parents in all the programmes that are held at school for example, meetings and parent-teacher conferences they have their issues ironed out easily. Also, the Ecological Systems Theory on its mesosystem it opines that positive home-school relationships lead to the betterment of the child. This is so because the parents will see the dimensions of the schools in implementing conditions which they feel are most applicable within their setups. The Community Development Authority, UAE (2021) content that, parents will go and conscientize their children to accept a number of the issues which they think cannot compromise their standards. Communities support school programmes such as donations to the schools by some business persons or by different denominations. This will help the learners to appreciate that they are part of the school system hence they will see the essence of oneness regardless of their religions. The role played by family members at home by disciplining their children in homes can play pivotal roles in making their children to follow instructions at school. This would simplify teachers' work in controlling the learners. Therefore, we see the interrelatedness of school and home in shaping and instilling values in the children.

To explore potential challenges and barriers faced by early childhood learners in culturally and religiously diverse environment.

In culturally and religiously diverse communities, children encounter several barriers which may stifle their integration in various communities and religions. Such challenges include language barriers which restrict their understanding of the curriculum being taught. This will stifle any realisable progress in literacy development. Children may also participate less or never try to due to this language barrier problem. Learners from the minority culture and religion can be discriminated by the majority which may culminate into withdrawal from other hence poor performance in the class (Chireshe 2013). For instance, in schools since our government is

advocating for inclusive classes. We might find a learner coming from a background where they use L1 and not used to the L2 whilst we have some used to L2 only. We find that even though these children will communicate it might have taken some ages for them to understand each other.

Some early childhood development learners may face a challenge directly from home since their parents may have different expectations from those of their teachers. In these respects, there will be a disconnection between the school and the home therefore the learners will be trapped in between hence they will be losers at the end of the day. In some cases, teachers may not be versatile in the culture that is being practiced by the communities they are working in this will restrict any form of development in relation to molding the learners the way they have to with regard to their specific cultures (Chireshe 2013).

To analyse the role of educator in supporting early childhood learners from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

Educators must play pivotal roles in order to address challenges that are being encountered by the learners in different schools. They may handle these issues through promotion of cultural competence to the learners. This can be achieved through conducting staff developments to the teachers so that they can be versatile on how to diagnose the challenges to the learners as well as how to handle the issues at hand. Chireshe (2013) and Makaya (2022) argued that, teachers must also know how to track unique backgrounds of the learners. In addition, they must create a favourable atmosphere where the learners can feel that they are acceptable by their teachers, at the same time, they can feel that they can present their problems without being placed for public consumption. In support of the above idea, teachers have a great role to play which is they have to be Cultural Brokers whereby they'll act as a bridge to smoothly integrate all learners into the various cultures found in the school system and also help children have an appreciation for diversity through their different teaching methods.

Teachers with the help of the administration should foster inclusivity to the learners. This will be attained through creating a welcoming

classroom environment (Majoko 2016 and Makaya 2022). The inclusion of diverse culture in school curriculum is one of the ways which can be employed so that learners from different backgrounds will feel accommodated hence they will be part of the system and contribute to its growth. The school should build good relationship with the parents so that they will support all the programmes that are being implemented at school.

To determine the mitigatory strategies that can address the negative impacts and leverage the benefits of cultural and religious diversity in Early Childhood Development (ECD).

Mitigation of the challenges encountered in multi-cultural and multi-religious environments is of paramount importance. Abdullah (2009), advocated for the introduction of multiculturalism in primary school curriculum where the learners will be taught about different cultures and religions. This will give the basis for their understanding of the essence of all cultures and religions. In this regard, all the learners will gain the sense of respect of others' religions as well as treating every one of them as sibling. Kimmel (2006), propounded that, it is critical to promote constructive controversies and peace building in different communities for some of these strategies help in ratifying cultural and religious conflicts among men. If the people in various communities have an in-depth understanding of unit obviously, they will always find amicable ways of addressing their differences.

Research methodology

A copy of pre-tested questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and administered by the researcher. The questionnaire consists of closed ended and open-ended questions. This was meant to assess level of awareness of the impacts of culture and religious diversity on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners. The questionnaire was prepared in a way which accommodating both literate and illiterate respondents. This was achieved through preparing it in the language well understood by the respondents. In addition, the researcher assisted the illiterate respondents to interpret the

questions so that they could not misinterpret hence providing irrelevant information. The use of the questionnaire was preferred as it could allow the respondents to complete them at their spare time since the majority of them are committed in their respective work places. In addition, since the data was to be collected from a large number of respondents, the use of questionnaires promoted the collection of data from a large number of respondents at one go. Key informant interviews were conducted in order to establish the support systems that are in place prevent negative implications that are posed by culture and religious diversity on Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners. Field survey was also carried out by the researcher in a bid to find the true reflection of what was transpired in selected schools.

Stratified sampling was employed in the selection of respondents. This was meant to have equal representation of respondents across ages and sex. District Administrators, school Administrators, teachers, School Development Association members youths and other local residents were selected in the data collection process.

Research design

This study employed exploratory research design. This research design will help the researcher through having an understanding of broad and complex problems. The researcher will be in a position to investigate deeply into the areas of enquiry hence obtaining the detailed information about the study area. It also helps to break down the problem into manageable components. Exploring the concepts will enable the researcher to uncover new ideas and perspectives that have not yet been discovered. Moreover, exploratory design enables the investigation of newly researched topics.

Data Analysis Procedure

In this study, the data will be analysed through following the following steps, data cleaning where raw data will be removed. This is the data which contains inconsistencies and errors. This process will also be including removal of duplicates. Thereafter, the data will be transformed where standardisation of the

variables will come into play. The results will then be analysed. Since this study is qualitative in nature, the results will not be represented graphically but the results will be interpreted in order to deduce meaning out of it. This will enable them to be usable by the readers of the information.

Results and discussion

The results are being discussed based on research objectives. All the responses were collated together then analysed to come up with the comprehensive outcome of the study.

The influence of cultural and religious diversity on the social development of early childhood learners.

Results reveal that, cultural and religious diversity play critical roles in the social development of children. These have a bearing in their learning processes in schools. Seventy percent of respondents indicated that religion and culture help children in the development of social skills which are critical in their survival. These skills include; the development of empathy, respect, carrying out different traditional practices as well as promoting harmony. Through cultural and religious practices, children will be in a position to develop cognitive flexibility where they will be accustomed to a broad perspective which equip them with problem solving skills. Learners who are exposed to multicultural and multireligious environments are gaining a great deal of experience in the reduction of bias and prejudice hence they are believe in inclusivity.

The link between family and community values to culture and religion on early childhood development.

There is an intricate relationship between family and community in inculcating values to young children. Usually, children adopt cultural values that they emulate from their parents, immediate family members and the entire community. Parents instill discipline to their children hence this will help children to obey the instructions they are given by their teachers therefore they are

bound to succeed in their various endeavours. Communities offer different support systems which are useful to the growth of children. These include religious institutions, community centres where children will undertake various activities as well as neighbourhood networks. Family member help children in the development of language which enables them to convey messages and any crucial information. Through this process, children will also develop critical thinking skills which promote logical thinking. Morals and ethics of all the people are deeply routed to their family backgrounds. They learn spiritual practices and beliefs from their family members hence which can foster a sense of purpose, community and belonging.

Potential challenges and barriers faced by early childhood learners in culturally and religiously diverse environment.

One hundred percent of the respondents were of the view that, some schools are religious sensitive as they are simply enrolling learners from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds but are disregarding the incorporation of their culture into the school systems. In this vein, respondents called for total religious sensitivity in schools so that no one will be left out.

There are certain cases where some of the learners, especially the minority were being discriminated by their peers. This has caused loneliness of a significant number of the learners as they were no longer been accommodated. In some cases, it took a considerable period for the teachers to notice such anomalies hence some of the issues were later addressed while it was too late. There is slight restriction of language in some schools in the district in question because not all the learners were born and bred in Mudzi district. There are some who migrated from all corners of Zimbabwe due to the district in question. These learners are still facing some difficulties in communicating with others hence a restriction in expression of their views. Since teachers are being deployed from all districts to Mudzi some are not versed with the culture and religion of their work especially during their first days therefore they may fail to give certain issues the treatment they deserve. In such cases, learners view it as unfair treatment therefore the issues are ending up being reported at home by the learners.

The role of educator in supporting early childhood learners from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

Results reveal that, teacher and school administrators should play pivotal role in supporting early childhood learners who are in culturally and religiously diverse schools. One hundred percent of respondents pointed out that teachers with the help of school administration should incorporate religious and cultural sensitivity in schools. This will be attained through considering different cultural and religious backgrounds through being flexible in school activities, diet and religious holidays. This will help to reduce any sense of rejection and stereotype to the learners. In addition, schools should address language barriers through supporting language development to the learners. In this case, learners will feel accommodated and they will be able to vent out all their concerns directly to their educators. Through this initiative, language development to the learners will be promoted. Teachers should be role models through accepting every learner. They should not show any sign of favorites when addressing issues. Fostering of inclusive learning environments in schools through integrating every religion and culture in school curriculum is paramount as it may help the learners to see themselves and their counterparts accepted.

Mitigatory strategies that can address the negative impacts of cultural and religious diversity in Early Childhood Development learners.

A number of respondents aired out that if the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education is meant to maintain equity in terms of the treatment of the learners in culturally and religiously diverse schools, it is imperative to equip the teachers with the relevant skills of handling issues of this nature. This will only be done through staff developing them. They may even organize in-service trainings to the teachers so that they will be well versed in handling such matters. Early Childhood learners are very delicate; they can be easily affected by slight mishaps which can lead to withdrawal if the issues which disrupt their moral are tempered

with. Ninety percent of the respondents cited that, teachers should always integrate all the learners in their programmes which include activities that can be carried out in the class as well as regular discussions during lessons and as pastime. Schools should always create safe spaces for learners' dialogue. These are places where they can share their experiences, culture and religions. This will help them to appreciate their peers' cultures and religions.

Conclusion

Form the foregoing investigations, it was noted that culture and religion play an important role towards the social development of learners. In addition, there is a close link between family and community values to culture and religion to early childhood development. Early childhood development is associated with a number of barriers which if remain unsolved, young children will face a big challenge in trying to see themselves attaining the desired qualities. In trying to mold the learners with desired qualities, teachers and their administrators should work tirelessly to maintain equity among learners.

Recommendations

From the foregoing results, the following recommendations were drawn; schools should embrace inclusivity in order to accommodate every learner irrespective of race, culture, religion and abilities. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should initiate culturally sensitive trainings for Early Childhood teachers so that they will be equipped to appreciate and accept cultural and religious differences exist and find amicable ways of addressing them. Trainings of this nature will create conducive conditions for the learners so that they will feel accommodated and accepted within the systems. Teachers should foster multicultural social interactions through designing classrooms activities which campus all the learners regardless of their culture and religion. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should carry out monitoring and evaluation exercises so that they can address biases if there are any. This will also give the basis for training needs to both educators and the parents. Ongoing researches must be carried out

in a bid to bridge the gap between culture, religion and education.

Through the implementation of these recommendations, Early Childhood Development education system will better support the children developmental needs. They

will also play an essential role in fostering respect for other cultures and religions. In addition, this will also stimulate positivity in relation to among learners hence they will see each other as valuable beings.

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