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Navigating Cultural Diversity in Education: Teacher's Intercultural Competence as a Foundation for Achieving SDG-4

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Abstract

Globalisation, migration and socio-cultural changes are making classrooms more culturally diverse. Intercultural Understanding is an important attribute for teachers for teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. It consists of knowledge and recognition of cultural similarities and differences. Diverse classrooms makes Intercultural Understanding essential for teachers. This study aims to explore how teacher's intercultural understanding is helpful in appreciation of cultural diversity and what challenges they face in culturally diverse schools. A qualitative research design was employed for this study by reviewing secondary sources of literature and policy documents. The study finds out that teachers' intercultural understanding is helpful in appreciation of cultural diversity by promoting inclusive environment, respect for learner diversity, enhancing teacher-student relationship, improves student performance, and supports culturally responsive teaching. The challenges faced by teachers while teaching in culturally diverse classroom are lack of adequate teacher training, communication barrier, difficulty in implementation , increased workload and balancing diverse needs of learners. By exploring the role of teachers' intercultural understanding in dealing with cultural diversity and the challenges faced by them, this study provides a foundation for pre-service training and continuous professional development of teachers which helps them in appreciation of cultural diversity to achieve the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The study also suggests the need for strengthening the educational policies in alignment with the goals of SDG 4 to promote inclusive and equitable education.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, Teachers' Intercultural understanding, Inclusive education, SDG 4

Introduction

In 21st century, classrooms are becoming more diverse, driven by globalisation, migration, and socio-cultural transformations. Students come from different cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds, which makes the teaching-learning process more challenging but also meaningful. This diversity brings new opportunities for learning and teachers need more than just subject-knowledge. The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), highlights the need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. It aims to ensure inclusive, equitable quality education through compulsory schooling, technical and vocational education and lifelong learning for all learners. "Education is the cornerstone that allows us to achieve many other Sustainable Development Goals. When people have access to quality education, they can finally break free from the cycle of poverty." (United Nations, 2015, para. 3)Source: United Nations (2015)



Fig.1 SDG 4: Quality Education. Source:Note. From *Goal 4: Quality Education* [Graphic], by United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform (https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4). Copyright by United Nations.

In Target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations (2015, para. 10) states that "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development."

"Intercultural Understanding is the ability to recognize, respect, and appreciate cultural differences while fostering meaningful interactions across diverse communities" (The Oxford Review, 2025, para. 1). Attributes such as flexibility, adaptability, and empathy for other cultures are important for developing intercultural understanding. Intercultural understanding of teachers is important for today's diverse classrooms. It helps teachers to build positive relationships with students and create inclusive environment in the classroom. In culturally diverse classrooms, teachers requires to be aware of the cultural backgrounds of all the learners and need to understand their needs. They must be more responsive and sensitive towards their needs and respect their differences.

Review of Related Literature

Denson et al. (2017) developed and validate intercultural understanding (ICU) instrument for teachers and students. The study highlighted that teachers who are more open to cultural diversity will tend to be more flexible and are more likely to utilise culturally inclusive teaching strategies in their teaching. It is an essential attribute in modern education system and plays a significant role in preparing individuals to function effectively in diverse educational settings.

Agostinetto and Bugno conducted a study to explore the relationship between teacher beliefs pertaining to cultural diversity and their actual teaching activities. The findings revealed that most teachers were at initial stages of intercultural development, indicating ethnocentric perspective and and only superficial recognition of cultural differences. This indicates challenges teachers face in culturally diverse classrooms.

Steele and Leming (2022) explored the extent to which student teachers gain intercultural competence by practising in culturally diverse settings. The study emphasized that such experiences prepare student teachers to work with students from migrant and diverse cultural backgrounds.

Hariyadi and Rodiyah (2023) evaluated the gender differences with the perception of multicultural education among the teachers and their attitude towards diverse classrooms. The findings of the study record high level of differences with respect to gender. The male teachers exhibited improved levels of cultural responsiveness.

Sinha (2024) in his study explored the role of cultural diversity on primary school teachers in India. The findings highlights that communication barriers and cultural misunderstandings are the hindrances to classroom communication. The study also suggests that promoting intercultural knowledge may foster student performance and help to promote social integration.

Rawat and Nagaraju (2025) conducted an analytical study on secondary school teachers perception

of ethnocultural inclusion. The researcher find out that teachers use cultural symbols and community knowledge in teaching, and emphasised the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in addressing diversity in educational settings.

Wong(2026) studied teachers's perception of multicultural competence and its implications for in-service teacher education programmes. The findings of the study revealed that teachers feel often feel ill-prepared in handling diversity in classroom. This lack of preparation acts a barrier in addressing cultural diversity effectively in the classroom.

Significance of the Study

Intercultural understanding (ICU) is becoming an important part of contributing effectively in our increasingly diverse society. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 states that "Teachers shape the future of the children and therefore, the future of the Nation. The motivation and empowerment of teachers is required to ensure the best possible future of the children and the nation". At the global level, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasize the need for inclusive and quality education for all. It highlights the importance of respecting the cultural diversity and the need to increase the supply of qualifies teachers for sustainable development. So, teachers plays an important role in translating these goals into classroom practice by fostering understanding, empathy for other cultures and inclusion among students. Therefore, the present study explores how intercultural understanding helps teachers work effectively in culturally diverse classrooms and appreciate cultural diversity. The paper also discusses the challenges teachers may face in culturally diverse schools. It connects teacher capacity with classroom inclusion and policy goals.

Research Questions

1. How teacher's intercultural understanding is helpful in appreciation of cultural diversity in educational settings?
2. What challenges do teachers face in culturally diverse schools?

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative approach based on comprehensive review of secondary data sources such as journal articles, policy documents and reports, etc. Relevant literature was collected from academic journals and academic databases.

Findings & Discussion

Role of Teachers' Intercultural Understanding in Appreciation of Cultural Diversity

1. **Promotes inclusive classroom environment:** Intercultural understanding helps teachers to create a classroom where every student feels respected and valued, which enables them to maintain equality and inclusion in classroom which is essential for diverse classrooms. Teachers who value cultural, linguistic and individual differences promotes inclusive practice in the classroom.
2. **Enhances teacher-student relationship:** When teachers develops intercultural understanding, they are able to interact more with their students which leads to better interaction and communication between teachers and students. So, Intercultural Understanding builds stronger teacher-student interaction.
3. **Promotes respect for diversity:** In a culturally diverse classroom, a teacher must respects learners diversity, it creates an environment where every learner feel equally welcomed and supportive irrespective of their background. Every professional teacher must possess sensitivity towards every learner.
4. **Improves student learning & performance:** Intercultural understanding helps in reducing communication gaps and misunderstandings in the classrooms which enhance the overall learning and performance of students. Students feel respected and included when there culture is recognized, which helps them perform better academically.
5. **Supports culturally responsive teaching:** Teachers with better intercultural understanding uses cultural symbols, community knowledge and flexible teaching methods while addressing diverse learners which promotes culturally responsive teaching in the classroom.

Challenges in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

1. **Lack of adequate teacher training & preparedness:** Teachers often do not receive adequate training. There is lack of teacher training in handling culturally diverse classrooms. Therefore, they may be unprepared for teaching in diverse classrooms.
2. **Communication barriers:** In a culturally diverse educational setting, teachers and students came from a different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Differences in language and expressions can create misunderstandings between teachers and students.
3. **Difficulty in implementation:** Without actual hands-on experience in diverse schools during

their training, the teachers may face difficulty while teaching. Even when teachers get trained and understand the importance of intercultural understanding, teachers may struggle to translate training into real classroom practice in diverse classrooms.

4. **Balancing diverse needs:** Students come from different culture and linguistic backgrounds in diverse classrooms. This makes it challenging for teachers to ensure equal participation and to address these varied needs of learners within the same classroom.
5. **Increased workload and stress:** Teaching in diverse classroom needs additional effort to understand each and every learner and their different needs to create an inclusive environment in the classroom. Teachers need to adapt teaching strategies according to the needs of learner which increases their workload and may lead to stress.

Implications of the Study

This study will inform teacher education curriculum, teacher-training and the need to integrate intercultural understanding as a core component of teacher education programmes. It also emphasize the need for strengthening the educational policies in alignment with the goals of SDG 4 to promote inclusive and equitable education.

Conclusion

Intercultural Understanding is a fundamental aspect of diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is an important attribute for teachers for teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. The study adopts qualitative review based approach to explore the role of Intercultural Understanding in appreciation of Cultural diversity and identified key challenges that teachers face in diverse educational settings. Teacher education institutes need to connect knowledge about diversity with practice in real-world diverse schools. Therefore intercultural understanding is essential to strengthen educational policies in alignment with SDG 4 goal of quality education. It enables teachers to embrace cultural diversity, communicate effectively, and create inclusive spaces where every learner feels valued.

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