



Embracing learners' cultural identity in the early years to enhance education for sustainable development

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Abstract

Considering learners' cultural identity in teaching and learning processes in early years is imperative since it boosts their self-esteem and leads to the development of important attributes for their ongoing lifelong learning. We argue that teachers should implement teaching approaches that promote learners' positive identities and inclinations. In the Southern African countries continual migration of people creates an identity crisis for young learners. This study is aimed at ensuring that all learners are included in the promotion of education for sustainable development in their early years through incorporating their cultural identities into the processes of teaching and learning. We used John Ogbu's (1978) cultural-ecological theory as the theoretical framework for the study. Methodologically, the study was conducted following the principles of the participatory transformative paradigm. As a community of practice, we adopted a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design for this study because of its inclusive and participatory form to explore how learners' cultural identities can be embraced to promote education for sustainable development in their early years in South Africa. Six Grade-R teachers from schools in Johannesburg were recruited as co-researchers of this study which led to there being nine members in the community of practice. We established that many teachers who teach in the early years are not well-versed in their learners' culture, and they spend more than a reasonable amount of time trying to make learners understand cultures foreign to them. In this study, we explain how teachers in early years can take into account the culture of learners in the processes of teaching and learning. We conclude that understanding learners' culture does not only improve their learning outcomes, but it also enhances education for sustainable development among them.

Keywords: cultural identity, early years, education, sustainable development, identity crises, learning processes, lifelong learning

Introduction

Over the years, there has been an increase in people migrating from one place to another which results in cultural dilution. For Coskun (2021), there is a great deal of external influence on native cultures, and this has impacted the core identity and values of many people in different communities in which predominant attitudes and behaviours are weaker or less concentrated. Dewey (1938) articulated that

We live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which in large measure is what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities. When this fact is ignored, experience is treated as if it were something which goes on exclusively inside an individual's body and mind. It ought not to be necessary to say that experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside the individual which give rise to experience. (p. 39)

In this sense, contemporary South African classrooms are culturally diverse, and the rich network of these cultures is of paramount importance in early childhood development because learners are shaped by their linguistic repertoires. Using the learners' home language is essential because it promotes a healthy self-esteem and cognitive development (Burns & Jules, 2021). Children learn through social interaction with their families, peers, and teachers. Through developing multilingual skills, teachers of early childhood learners should create and sustain inclusive learning spaces that respect learners' linguistic backgrounds and empower them to embrace their multilingual identities (Nwachukwu et al., 2024). Essential cultural elements such as rhymes, poetry, stories, music, and dancing are the tools through which childhood teaching and learning was promoted in traditional African contexts (Ogunyemi & Henning, 2020).

During this foundational phase, learners begin to form perceptions of the world. Wood (2010) has argued that culture strongly influences the learners' identities that are created and re-created in interactions between people. These cultural identities, which include beliefs, language, and traditions, are formulated. Thus, cultural identities shape the learners' self and belonging. Learners relate well to teaching pedagogies that address their needs (Makoelle, 2014). Since early childhood teachers must create meaningful learning experiences in culturally diverse classrooms, it is crucial that they embrace learners' cultural identities (Burns & Jules, 2021) since children explore the unknown from the perspective of the known (Piaget, 1959). However, the abundant diversity in early childhood classrooms raises the question, "Are our educational systems serving all our learners in culturally responsive ways that will embrace cultural identities?" Thus, this study is focused on fostering the dimensions of embracing cultural identities in the early years of education to enhance education for sustainable development.

According to Ogunyemi and Henning (2020) colonialism brought a distortion of and decline in the use of traditional curricula for early childhood education in many parts of Africa so curricula in most African schools are westernised and disregard African cultural knowledge (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019). Ogunyemi and Henning (2020) have argued that the predominance

of westernised education has led to a serious knowledge gap among early childhood teachers on how to balance traditional learning with colonial educational practices in the ongoing modernisation process in Africa. The early childhood curricula and teaching practices pose a barrier to promoting a deeper connection between learners' cultural backgrounds and sustainable development objectives.

The importance of learners' cultural identities

Cultural identity is defined as a variety of a larger construct of personal identity, an individual's frameworks, and cultural orientations (Meca et al. 2017). It encompasses localised philosophical frameworks that have an influence on the way in which the child constructs learning. Ignoring the influence of these cultural identities in educational settings is detrimental to learners in their early years of education (Cheng & Li, 2012). Building an effective learning community can be achieved through encouraging learners to draw from their own cultural experiences as a vehicle through which they can express learned knowledge through voice and identity (Liontas & Mannion, 2021). In South Africa, contemporary non-racist early childhood education originated from the democratic struggle against apartheid (Mouton et al., 2001). The aim was to address the need for a nurturing, educative, and supportive environment for all South African children, including the marginalised ones. African children were rendered increasingly vulnerable by the discriminatory nature of apartheid laws and policies, such as the migrant labour system and forced removals in the regimes prior to 1994 (Mouton et al., 2001). During apartheid, the cultural identities that were valued were those of the minority white population because they were in authority (Le Roux & Odeyemi, 2021).

Degotardi et al. (2022) noted that it is in the early years that learners assign representational meaning to the context in which they are developing cultural identity and that this is a complex powerful base and a resource that teachers must use to enhance teaching for sustainable development. Although the early childhood years are a critical period for the development of language and a foundational tool for learning (Zauch et al., 2016), most South African children are still subjected to conditions that are not conducive to their development (Themane, 2017). Engaging with home language and culture is an important aspect of sustainable development and the failure to do so disadvantages learners (Ewing et al., 2017).

Children's participation in culture develops their thinking skills while inclusion enables them to advocate for equality (Whalley, 2007). Cultural identity has a valuable contribution to make to the future of education (Buzzetto-Hollywood, 2023). We argue that incorporating cultural identities through applying different pedagogies to teaching and learning in the early years is a necessary base for inclusion. Vygotsky (1978) highlighted that a process of gradual internalisation proceeds from the cultural world to the individual so, for learning to occur, new knowledge must be connected to what is already known (Siemens, 2017).

Integrating education for sustainable development in the early childhood curriculum

Cultural diversity is an integral element in the mandates of sustainable development goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 4 which prioritises the importance of ensuring that learning is relevant to those for whom it is prepared (González 2016). It is, therefore, important for early childhood teachers to realise the importance of cultural identities in the classroom. Chan (2022) argued that cultural diversity is a common phenomenon owing to human migration, so early childhood is an ideal phase during which families can be helped to feel respected as they see teachers being culturally sensitive and ensuring that their cultures are maintained. This implies that teachers are supposed to have knowledge about how to deal with the diverse needs of learners. Culturally diverse learners' academic performance has been reported to lag behind their peers, and this is attributed to a failure in the education system to meet the diverse learners' academic and social needs (Degotardi et al, 2022). During teaching and learning, the curriculum should embrace fairness, respect for diversity, inclusion, and equity through storytelling, role playing, and classroom discussions. Teachers should also emphasise values such as empathy, respect, and responsibility, so that children can understand their role in fostering a sustainable society.

Barth (2015) proclaimed the importance of implementing pedagogical approaches that guide the learning process in early childhood to stimulate learning processes for Education for Sustainable Development (*ESD*). In addition, Taylor and Nolen (2019) argued that learning can be hampered when there is no relationship between curriculum content, culture, and social norms. This lack of congruence between cultural backgrounds and pedagogical practices contributes to lower academic performance (Ang & Flewitt 2015) so teachers are required to embrace learners' identities during teaching and learning. According to Zauch et al. (2016), the growth of self-identity and national identity can be hindered when language and cultural differences are not embraced; learners need to see themselves reflected in what they are learning along with cultural referents in the classroom.

Culturally responsive teaching pedagogy

Culturally responsive teaching pedagogy refers to teachers embracing the role of cultural and linguistic diversity in the teaching and learning environment (Faircloth, 2020). Embracing cultural diversity is not only about being culturally responsive but also about sustaining learners' cultural and linguistic competencies in their communities (Shiller, 2020). It is a way of bridging the gap between the teacher and the learners since the teacher then gets to know and understand how cultural nuances can impact learners' learning. Once the cultural strengths are identified the teacher can use the learning environment as a safe space in which to nurture them to promote learners' achievement. Teachers' cultural sensitivity ensures that children remain proud of their heritage and helps them to develop the positive and healthy identities that are foundational to learning (Chan, 2022).

The key principle of this pedagogy is the importance of drawing from learners' cultures to shape them through cultural scaffolding when one is teaching the curriculum (Muniz, 2020). Jie and Xinxing (2021) have noted that teachers need to integrate a curriculum that encourages learners to reflect on their learning experiences and articulate their identity as a community. Cultural conceptualisation is a cognitive process of schematisation so it is an essential building block in learning (Fleischmann & Verkuyten, 2016). Pedagogies that are promoted in inclusive classrooms are those that are transformative in linking formal to informal learning where culture plays an important role (Muniz, 2020). In many rural contexts there are no resources that make it easy to teach learners in the early years and this defeats the purpose of social justice. Also, in some schools, teachers who teach in the early childhood classroom do not understand the concept of inclusive practice.

Theoretical framework-cultural ecological theory

As mentioned above, this study is underpinned by Ogbu's (1978) cultural-ecological theory (CE). This theory was categorised later by Ogbu (1998) into two major parts: the system which is described by the way in which the minority groups are treated or mistreated in terms of educational policies, pedagogy, and returns for their investment or school credentials; and community forces that focus on the perception and responses of the minority group regarding schooling because of the treatment they received. It is important to note that the responses from the subgroups are also affected by the causes behind their having become a minority group. In this context, the minority groups are the children from diverse marginalised ethnic groups. We understand that these two parts of the theory describe the barriers that lead to collective challenges for minorities, such as instructional discrimination, relational discrimination, and symbolic discrimination (Ogbu, 1981; Ogunyemi, 2017).

According to Ogbu's (2002) CE theory the school success of minority children depends on the attitudes of society at large and the level of community support. Ogunyemi (2017) and Ogbu (1998) noted that the differences among certain cultures in school communities have made many learners suffer from prolonged cultural and linguistic discrimination which has led to poor learning outcomes. In South Africa, there are many learners who do not speak any of the local languages and are forced to adopt an unknown language as a medium of instruction in the classroom. Ogbu (1998) highlighted that differences of culture and language between people from the minority groups on the one hand, and those of the influential society on the other, creates identity crises especially in learners and this affects their development. After all, human beings interact with their worlds through cultural artifacts, tools, and symbols, including language (Ogbu, 1981). Therefore, language is necessarily a cultural tool essential to effective learning and human development, and it leads to mediating different activities among individuals to promote valuable practices in communities (Ogunyemi, 2017).

Notably, many kinds of behaviour, symbols, and meanings that are characteristics of the dominant groups are inappropriate, undesirable, and abusive in nature to those outside of these groups (Ogbu 2002). Ogbu (1978, 1992) referred to this phenomenon as cultural

inversion that coerces the members of the minority group to choose between conforming to their own group's model of behaviour or to the model of the dominant group. This leads young children in the early years to lose their cultural values and has a negative impact on their learning because culture and language are among the most important aspects related to cognitive development (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). According to Ogbu (1992), stereotypical generalisations of minority cultures are caused by the inability of the dominant group to acknowledge primary and secondary cultural differences. Thus, in this study we consider how the system influences the academic performance of the minority in having carried out research to explain the importance of embracing learners' identities in their early years with the aim of promoting education for sustainable development.

Research methodology

This paper was derived from a PALAR study that was conducted following a qualitative approach to allow members of the community of practice to interact and provide deeper insights (see Zuber-Skerritt & Wood, 2019), on ways of improving their own teaching and learning as Grade R teachers in different schools. Mohajan (2018) highlighted the notion that a qualitative approach is appropriate for studies that are not conducted to prove a hypothesis, but aim, rather, to generate data from a natural setting. This approach helped us to get insights from members of the community of practice which, in turn, helped us to develop ideas on changing teaching practices in our roles as university lecturers.

We adopted the participatory transformative paradigm for this study. We chose this paradigm because it values the discovery of new knowledge by participants while also limiting the power dynamics between them (Jackson et al., 2016; Kovach, 2021). Furthermore, the participatory transformative paradigm incorporates emancipatory, participatory, and inclusive approaches to research (Romm, 2015). Thus, in this study, we aimed to improve our own teaching and learning. To achieve this objective, we followed the principles of PALAR. Zuber-Skerritt (2011) and Wood (2020) described PALAR as a methodology that is practical, inventive, and resourceful in relation to professional development and problem solving in marginalised communities. We chose this design based on its three processes which are relationship building, collaboration, and research; for Wood (2020) the combination of these processes helps the communities to become part of the research process leading to educational amelioration. The recruitment of the co-researchers for this study was done with the help of the school administrator who acted as the gate keeper. With this understanding, all co-researchers were given equal opportunities to express their opinion on how learners' identities could be embraced and used to enhance ESD in Grade R in South Africa. We understand that PALAR is a transformative, collaborative, and democratic approach that is used to address complex issues (Wood, 2020). Therefore, as members of a community of practice we were guided by the seven Cs (communication, commitment, competence, compromise, critical self-reflection, collaboration, and coaching) and three Rs (relationship, reflection, and recognition) as democratic values and principles. The PALAR cyclic process was repeated in all three cycles. To generate robust data, we made use of recorded and transcribed community of practice TEAMS meetings, reflective diaries, and photovoice.

Context of the study

As three university lecturers, we recruited six Grade-R teachers from schools in Johannesburg to be co-researchers of this study which led to a total of nine members in the community of practice. Revans (2017) explained that a community of practice must be made up of a small group of people to give them opportunities to share their experiences explicitly. Table 1 below shows the demographic data of the secondary co-researchers.

Table 1
Participants' biographical information

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age group	Nationality	Teaching experience
Maggie	Female	30–35	South African	9 years
Thabo	Male	45+	South African	23 years
Nothi	Female	40–45	Zimbabwean	15 years
Imma	Male	25–30	Nigerian	6 years
Pam	Female	45+	Zimbabwean	18 years
Nido	Female	30–35	South African	11 years

Data analysis and ethics

Data analysis was performed collaboratively following Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis method. This allowed us to identify the themes and patterns that emerged from the qualitative data. We followed the six steps of the process, which familiarised us with the data that had been collected and enabled us to generate initial codes. Furthermore, we defined the themes and made sure that they were identified correctly and then we reviewed them all. Later, we defined and named the themes to establish an easy understanding of the findings. Finally, we produced a report to present the data according to the themes.

To ensure the integrity of the research throughout the study, we adhered to the five quality indicators established by Herr and Andersen (2015), namely the validity of the outcomes and the processes, as well as the democratic validity, the catalytic validity, and the dialogue validity. We applied for ethical approval from The Edu-Rec Ethics Committee of North-West University, which granted permission to conduct research at a low-risk level.

Findings and discussion

The findings in this paper revealed that teacher training institutions are producing teachers who do not have the skills to teach culturally diverse classes. Excerpts of data which was

generated from recorded and transcribed community of practice discussions, photovoice, and reflections are presented and substantiated by literature under each of the three themes below.

Theme 1: Lack of culturally responsive teacher training

Based on the opinions provided by the participants during data generation, the training received by student teachers does not equip them with the skills required to address cultural diversity in classrooms. Faircloth (2020) and Shiller (2020) agreed that the success of the teacher hinges on their being able to accommodate every learner's cultural background. Contrary to this, Imma¹ said,

The problem with teaching in Johannesburg is that we do not only have learners who are from other provinces of South Africa, but we also have those who are from neighbouring countries. In such cases, even if I would like to code-switch so that they understand, it becomes a challenge as I was never exposed to their home languages.

This response shows that the teacher training programmes do not cover different languages spoken in South Africa or in neighbouring countries. This view resonates that held by Ogunyemi (2017) and Ogbu (1998) that learners who belong to minor cultures do not have a good learning experience. However, we deduced that teachers are willing to be taught other languages and cultures so that they can be enabled to help all learners. Pam, another participant, explained,

A challenge is when we are being trained in the universities they only focus on one or two languages, which makes it difficult for us as teachers to know what is happening in different languages and cultures even those that are within the South African context, so I think it should start from the universities to teach us aspects of different cultures so that we know what to do when teaching learners from different cultures.

Figure 1:

A closed teachers' training framework



From this extract, there is evidence that the higher education system does not equip teachers with the necessary skills for them to be able to embrace learners' cultural identities in the teaching and learning processes. It seems as if each university in South Africa is concerned with the cultural identities of those that reside in the particular province in which it is

1 The names of participants are pseudonymous, and their responses have not been edited.

situated. We consider these institutional cultures to be perpetuating cultural stigmatisation and discrimination. Ogbu (1992) explained that the stereotypical tendencies that communities have precede some negative connotations related to the learning of children who come from minority cultures. Furthermore, literature confirms that marginalising cultures as trivial compromises the relevant pedagogical practices and hampers meaningful learning among learners (Durden et al. 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2005). In addition, Nothi said,

What is happening in different universities that are in different provinces, they tend to focus on the language that is prominent in their provinces. In other words, each university is focusing on the language that is spoken in that province. For example, universities in Kwa Zulu Natal focus more on isiZulu, while the ones in the Eastern Cape focus more on isiXhosa, and the one in the Northwest focus on isiTswana and this makes it difficult for teachers to acquire multicultural skills that are necessary when teaching these young ones.

The ideas expressed by these two participants suggest that training institutions are answerable to the problem of failing to embed the cultures of learners in the teaching and learning processes. It is therefore argued in this paper that confining learners to only one language defeats the purpose of Education for Sustainable Development as highlighted in SDG4. In this context, Nido said,

I was a distance student; I only received study material in English and even the presentations were in English. In the content of the modules that I did, there was nothing that speaks about cultural diversity.

We considered Nido's response to be cause for concern because this practice hampers the achievement of education for sustainable development. Maggie added to this view by providing a photograph of an elephant lying on the ground and explained what it signifies to the higher education system in saying,

The hippo symbolises a child who comes from a small culture. He is failing to comprehend the presented lesson. The pit represents confinement, while the bar represents limitations to learners who would be fruitful should they be exposed to the richness of languages that are already in the classroom. The green tree represents a multilingual teacher who can incorporate different languages into her class.

Figure 2

Failing to consider the learner's cultures affects their learning outcomes



Maggie's idea shows that education for sustainable development can be compromised if learners' cultures are not embraced in the teaching and learning process. González (2016) emphasised the importance of considering learners' cultural background in the curriculum so that all learners can benefit. Furthermore, this highlighted the fact that quality education can be promoted when teachers are able to embrace different languages and cultures in their teaching. The following theme deliberates on the challenges that face teachers working with young children. Teachers in training need to be exposed to different methods that address the cultural diversity of learners. For example, they could be exposed to games from different cultures so that they can use them to cater for diverse cultures in a class.

Cultural challenges in early year education

There are several challenges that are encountered in the early years regarding cultural diversity. These challenges pose difficulties in promoting ESD to young learners. According to Ogbu (1978, 1992) failing to acknowledge the cultural values of learners has a negative impact on their academic progress. Thabo highlighted some of the challenges that are faced in early year education.

The challenge we face is that in our classes we have children from different cultures which we do not even know, so it is difficult for us to incorporate the norms and values from such cultures to the extent that I end up using my culture as a point of reference when teaching. For example, these learners are still learning in their home languages, and it is a good base for any additional language, but now we end up being forced to ignore languages that we cannot even understand.

From this, it would appear that some early years teachers fail to consider learners' cultures and languages although it is a mandatory for young children to learn effectively. Degotardi et

al. (2022) and Lontas and Mannion (2021) noted that understanding learners' culture is a powerful resource that all teachers should aim to possess. The exodus of teachers from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe compromised cultural understanding. In her response, Maggie said,

The problem is that I am a foreign national who is teaching Grade 1, and I am not conversant with all the South African languages except English. It becomes a challenge to teach or code-switch in a South African home language. We also do not have resources for trans-languaging, we are always busy with content, and we do not have time for trans-languaging.

Maggie's point of view makes it clear that although teachers may be willing to bridge the existing cultural gaps, they are challenged by the issue of languages that the children speak of which they have no knowledge. Byrd (2016), Ogunyemi (2017) and Vygotsky (1978) explained that language is the most important tools for cultural transition. As Pam said,

It is a very big challenge to teach different cultures in one class because at some point it ends up confusing the teacher. Some cultures totally contradict, so some learners would see their cultures as better than others based on where they come from and on the activities that are done in class for example the issue of xenophobia makes foreign learners feel inferior, and the locals even own the class or the school. Even, foreign teachers find it difficult to incorporate their cultures as they are made to feel inferior.

We deduce from Pam's response that the issues of cultural violence in South Africa have made both teachers and learners hide their identities. This situation has led to some minority cultures being coerced to conform to the norms and values of major cultures in Gauteng. Ogbu (1978) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986) noted that cultural inversion is a barrier to cognitive development for many learners. In addition to what Pam said, Imma provided a photograph and explained her views with regard to cultural diversity.

This reminds me of a class with learners from different cultural backgrounds. The branches of the tree are crossing each other which symbolises cultural conflicts within the class. The nests make me to think of learners who are grouping themselves according to their languages and cultures and they are ready to serve their respective communities. The bigger branches make me think of teachers who are short-sighted about cultural beliefs and rigid due to their own values and beliefs.

Figure 3

A bunch of different cultures in the classroom



From Imma's photovoice picture, we understand that there are many challenges that are faced by multicultural classes in South Africa. These include misunderstandings that are related to the beliefs of certain cultures. The formation of cultural clusters in the classes possibly hinder the promotion of education for sustainable development in the early years. Ogunyemi (2017) and Ogbu (1981) explained that cultural and linguistic stereotyping and discrimination are collective challenges that can erode the education system as well as destroy community development. Hence, the few leaves that can be seen on the tree in Imma's picture show that if learners' identities are embraced in the teaching and learning processes ESD can be enhanced.

Suggested strategies towards culturally responsive teaching

This theme focuses on the strategies that can be used to embrace learners' identities in the teaching and learning processes.

The current situations in higher education institutions as well as the challenges faced by early years teachers to embrace the learners' cultural identities in the teaching and learning processes have been highlighted above. We now present some strategies that could be employed to promote cultural responsiveness in classrooms. Chan (2022) stressed that it is the responsibility of a teacher to identify an approach that can make learners from different backgrounds feel accommodated in the classroom. Thabo suggested,

For all the universities to have a multicultural approach, modules should be universal to make teachers relevant in any province they are teaching in. So, I think if lecturers from different universities collaborate to formulate compulsory modules to be taught to teachers in all universities that can be of great help.

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to make sure that they bridge the challenges of cultural differences. Thabo emphasised that that university lectures should lead the collaborative agenda with the aim of making sure that all universities have a uniform procedure to ensure that teachers are equipped with relevant cultural knowledge. This idea resonates with the principles of PALAR as it was used in the current study to allow participants to learn from each other's experiences and transform their practices (see Wood, 2010; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) regarding the embedment of learners' cultural identities. This transformation is crucial in promoting education for sustainable development in South Africa and beyond. In the same context, Imma said,

I suggest that all teachers use trans-linguaging as a way of including all the languages that are represented in their classroom, this means to say even if we teach in English, we can have vocabulary words in different languages that are translated.

The view given by Imma stresses Thabo's point and adds that after the teachers have been equipped with adequate understanding of different cultures, they can accommodate all learners regardless of their language or culture. This means that no culture will be seen to be superior to the others so learners will be enabled to respect each other. Burns and Jules (2021) and Fleischmann and Verkuyten (2016) illuminated that when the cultures and languages of learners are recognised, their learning becomes meaningful. This suggests that embracing learners' identities in the classroom can go a long way towards promoting ESD. Furthermore, as Maggie said,

If it can be allowed, teachers could bring someone from the community who has knowledge about a certain culture to teach some cultural concepts as Johannesburg has people from different cultures and languages.

Using available assets such as people who have more knowledge in certain cultures could bridge the cultural defects that are present in a classroom, particularly in the early years of learning. Tickly (2019) and Shiller (2020) accentuated that an education system that is inflexible, unyielding and resistant to transformation confirms that only teachers are responsible for educating learners, hence learners lose out on multicultural values that fit into every society. This means that employing a differentiated instruction approach can offer all learners a valuable dividend. Nothi then provided a photograph of different animals to explain the benefits of a multicultural education. She said,

This picture of animals reminds me of a school community that has people from different cultures as we can see there are different animals like buffalos, which represent different cultures in a society. The animals seem to be at peace with each

other, which should be the case with the learners from different cultures in one class who are focusing on acquiring education in preparation for their future lives.

Figure 4
Cultural inclusivity for sustainability



From the photograph and explanation from Nothi we understood that when teachers incorporate different cultural values in a classroom all learners can be unified, and learning can become a tool for solving problems in communities. Burns and Jules (2021) and Zauch et al. (2016) maintained that a multicultural approach in education is indispensable to the success of not only learners but also of the entire community. This suggests that embracing learners' identity in the teaching and learning process leads to the promotion of ESD to learners in the early years as well as to all other learners.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study revealed that Grade R teachers are not fully capable of teaching diverse learners in their classrooms. This is because they were never exposed to culturally responsive training which is one of the important aspects of accommodating diversity. This affects learning to teach in ways that include supporting language and cultural tools to ensure the socio-cultural development of children. Therefore, we conclude that regardless of the diversity of learners in South Africa, their identities should be catered for throughout their education. To ensure that strategies benefit both the learners and teachers, we recommend that people in communities should work in a collective way so that they can use the local talent to enhance education for sustainable development.

Since this was a qualitative study, we used one case study which may make it difficult to generalise the findings. As researchers we did not engage with other universities to see how cultural responsiveness is incorporated in their curriculum content. Other researchers can therefore do the same study in different contexts and involve other universities.

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