

Learner-Centred Education and Intercultural Competence: Learners' Experiences in Multicultural Classrooms in Namibia

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Abstract

Due to the growing cultural diversity in Namibian schools, developing the intercultural competence of learners is an imperative. This study investigates how learners experience cultural diversity and develop intercultural competence within learner-centred classrooms in urban Namibian schools. Anchored on four interrelated theoretical models such as intercultural competence, learner-centred education (LCE), multicultural education, and sociocultural theory, the research explores how inclusive education shape learners' perceptions and interactions. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 24 learners from three culturally mixed schools in Windhoek. The analysis of data revealed three core themes: facing cultural differences, pedagogical responsiveness, and identity and belonging. Findings suggest that learner-centred education fosters cultural awareness and collaboration but challenges such as language barriers and marginalisation hinder the realisation of its full benefits. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of learner-centred education in Namibia and offers insights for teachers, administrators, and researchers who are committed to inclusive education.

Keywords: "Intercultural competence", "Learner-centred education", "Multicultural classroom", "Namibia", "Inclusive education".

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing cultural diversity and technological interconnectedness have made intercultural competence a *sine qua non* for education systems globally and locally. Accordingly, intercultural competence has become a foundational skill for learners in multicultural societies (Deardorff, 2006). Classrooms in Namibia, due to the country's ethnic, linguistic, and cultural plurality, often reflect cultural diversity. This scenario presents both challenges and opportunities for Namibian learners to experience inclusive education.

Learner-centred education (LCE), which emphasises active participation, critical thinking, and the co-construction of knowledge, has been widely advocated as a pedagogical approach that can support intercultural learning (Schweisfurth, 2013). By bringing to the fore learners' experiences and cultural backgrounds, LCE as an educational model allows empathy, mutual respect, and collaborative engagement across cultures. However, according to Ekandjo (2018; Constantino, 2021), the implementation of learner-centred approaches in Namibian classrooms remains uneven, particularly in urban schools where multicultural schools are predominant.

Despite policy pronouncements and efforts to implement LCE in Namibia, limited empirical research has explored how learners themselves experience multicultural classrooms and how they develop intercultural competence within these learning spaces. Existing studies have mainly focused on teacher practices and curriculum reforms. Thus, leaving a gap in understanding the lived realities of learners in everyday school life of cultural diversity. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating learners' experiences and perceptions of intercultural competence in selected multicultural classrooms in Namibia.

The research aim of the study is two-fold. First, it seeks to highlight how learners interpret and respond to cultural differences in their learning environments. Second, it seeks to determine how learner-centred methods may support or hinder the development of intercultural competence. By bringing to the fore learners' voices, the study contributes to a greater understanding of inclusive education in Namibia and offers insights for teachers, administrators, and researchers who are committed to culturally inclusive education.

2. Theoretical Framework

The subject of inclusive education is multifaceted. Therefore, to explore how learners in Namibia's intercultural classrooms experience and respond to cultural diversity, this study draws on four interrelated theoretical constructs. These are: intercultural competence, learner-centred education (LCE), multicultural education, and sociocultural theory. According to Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence involves attitudes of openness, cultural knowledge, and adaptive communication skills, serving as foundations for social cohesion and global interconnectedness. Learner-centred education, according to Schweisfurth (2013), emphasises active engagement and the co-construction of knowledge. Learner-centred education is thus an educational approach that values diverse cultural perspectives and fosters empathy in intercultural settings. On the other hand, multicultural education complements LCE by promoting equity and inclusion through culturally responsive curricula and teaching practices (Banks, 2004; Gay, 2010). Lastly, the sociocultural theory is rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) work. Vygotsky stresses the role of social interaction and cultural tools in shaping learning in classrooms where learners bring different cultural experiences and perspectives. Together, these theoretical models serve as an effective means for examining how learner-centred methods can support the development of intercultural competence and how learners interpret cultural differences in Namibian learning environments. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do learners experience cultural diversity in multicultural classrooms in Namibia?
2. In what ways do learner-centred methods influence the development of intercultural competence among learners?
3. What challenges or opportunities do learners encounter when engaging with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds in school settings?

3. Literature Review

Intercultural competence and inclusive education methods have gained increasing attention in global education discourse. However, empirical research on the subjects in Namibia remains limited, particularly from the perspective of learners. While national policy frameworks advocate for learner-centred and culturally responsive education, the realities of intercultural classrooms reveal glaring gaps between policy intent and realities in the classrooms. Existing literature has mainly focused on teacher practices, curriculum reforms, and systemic challenges, leaving the lived experiences of learners underexplored.

This literature review synthesises relevant literature across three thematic domains, namely: learners' experiences of cultural diversity, the role of learner-centred pedagogies in fostering intercultural competence, and the challenges or opportunities of multicultural engagement. Together, these domains present a conceptual basis for understanding how Namibian learners meander through and interpret cultural difference in their educational environments.

3.1 Learners' Experiences of Cultural Diversity

Namibian classrooms are a mosaic of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. However, the phenomenon of the lived experiences of learners within the intercultural spaces is not yet fully explored. Ninkova (2020) highlights that despite inclusive education policies, marginalised groups such as the Ju'hoansi San continue to face cultural misrecognition and exclusion in school environments. This suggests a disconnect between policy and practice. Similarly, while the post-independence reforms in Namibia aimed to unify different ethnic groups under a single education system, the practical integration of multicultural content remains uneven (Fredericks, 2006).

Globally, Kalogerogianni (2025) argues that intercultural education must go beyond superficial inclusion to foster genuine recognition and social cohesion. This is achieved through curriculum reform and pedagogical transformation. It should go one step further down to implementation in the classrooms. This is achieved by developing the capacity of teachers through robust pre-service and in-service training programmes (Cerna, 2020). These studies underscore the importance of bringing to the centre learners' voices by highlighting how they experience and negotiate cultural diversity in everyday school life.

3.2 Learner-Centred Pedagogies and Intercultural Competence

Learner-centred education (LCE) has been promoted in Namibia since independence. Nevertheless, its implementation varies widely from school to school and classroom to classroom. Awe (2007) found that while teachers in the Omusati region acknowledged the value of LCE, its consistent application was hindered by limited training and contextual challenges. Ndemuweda (2018) further revealed that teachers' interpretations of LCE policy often diverged from its intended goals. For example, teachers viewed LCE as classroom activities or methods (e.g., group work, questioning techniques) rather than a deeper philosophical shift in teaching and learning. Some teachers understood LCE as learners taking full responsibility of their learning (Ndemuweda, 2018). These misconceptions about LCE have affected classroom practice and deprived learners the full engagement to benefit from the cultural diversity in the classrooms. Hence, learners may not be able to develop intercultural competence.

Internationally, Al-Afifi et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review identifying three classroom practices that effectively foster intercultural competence: learning about culture, reflecting on culture, and experiencing culture. Similarly, Ganesan and Morales (2024) highlight the role of collaborative discourse and reflective teaching in multilingual classrooms. The study stresses the need for strengthening collaborative learning among students with diverse cultural and linguistic experiences and building intercultural competence among students because failure to do so inhibits efforts to cultivate safe and supportive learning environments for all students. These practices align closely with LCE principles. This suggests that when implemented effectively, learner-centred pedagogies can serve as a vehicle for intercultural learning.

3.3 Challenges or Opportunities in Multicultural Engagement

Teaching and learning in multicultural classrooms present both pedagogical challenges and transformative opportunities. Chimbunde and Moreeng (2024) argue that teachers often lack the training to deal with cultural complexity. Thus, leading to limited pedagogical responsiveness and communication barriers. In

Namibia, translanguaging practices have emerged as a promising strategy to bridge linguistic divides and support learner engagement, especially in Grade 4 classrooms transitioning to English medium instruction (Mashinja & Mwanza, 2025).

These findings suggest that learners' intercultural engagement is shaped not only by peer interactions but also by the extent to which pedagogical practices accommodate linguistic and cultural diversity. Understanding these dynamics from the learners' perspective is essential for designing inclusive and responsive educational environments.

3.4 Synthesis and Research Gap Identification

The reviewed literature underscores a growing recognition of the importance of intercultural competence and inclusive pedagogy in multicultural education globally and locally. Scholars such as Deardorff (2006) and Kalogerogianni (2025) emphasise that intercultural competence involves more than superficial inclusion, it requires intentional curriculum reform, reflective dialogue, and pedagogical change. In the Namibian context, studies by Fredericks (2006), Ninkova (2020), and Awe (2007) reveal that while policy frameworks advocate for learner-centred and inclusive education, their implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in addressing the cultural realities of marginalised groups. International research further supports the role of learner-centred approaches in fostering intercultural competence, with Al-Afifi et al. (2025) identifying experiential and reflective classroom practices as key drivers of intercultural learning.

Despite these contributions, a critical gap persists in the literature. Lived experiences of learners themselves remain largely absent. Existing studies have predominantly focused on teacher practices, curriculum design, and systemic challenges, leaving unexplored how learners interpret, navigate, and respond to cultural diversity in their everyday school life. Moreover, few studies have examined how learner-centred pedagogies are experienced by learners in multicultural classrooms, or how these pedagogies influence the development of intercultural competence from the learner's perspective. This study addresses that gap by foregrounding learners' narratives in selected Namibian schools. Thus, offering empirical insights into the relational, emotional, and pedagogical dimensions of intercultural engagement.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design anchored in interpretivist epistemology. The aim was to explore learners' lived experiences and perceptions of intercultural competence within multicultural classroom settings. Qualitative methods were chosen to capture the depth and nuance of learners' cultural interpretations and social interactions that are often overlooked in quantitative approaches. The study utilised semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to generate rich narrative data that reflect learners' perspectives on cultural diversity and pedagogical practices. Thematic analysis was applied to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships within the data, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

4.3 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select participants from three urban schools in Windhoek, Namibia. Each school is characterised by culturally diverse learner populations. The selection criteria included learners aged 13 to 17 who had at least one year of experience in a multicultural classroom. A total of 24 learners participated in the study - 12 in individual interviews and 12 in two focus groups. This sample size was

deemed sufficient to achieve thematic saturation while allowing for variation in cultural backgrounds, language difference, and classroom experiences. School principals and teachers assisted in identifying participants who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to share their experiences.

4.4 Data Collection Procedures and Analysis Techniques

Data were collected over a two-week period using semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions. These methods were selected to elicit contextualised accounts of learners' experiences with cultural diversity and learner-centred pedagogy in multicultural classrooms. Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns and significant statements. Initial codes were generated inductively and grouped into broader themes that aligned with the study's conceptual framework.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and followed a flexible guide that explored learners' perceptions of cultural difference, classroom interactions, and pedagogical practices. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Two focus group discussions were held with six learners each, selected to ensure diversity in cultural backgrounds and classroom experiences. Each session lasted about 60 minutes and was moderated using probing questions aligned with the study's research questions. Throughout the data collection process, field notes and reflexive memos were maintained to capture contextual observations and emerging analytical insights.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the concerned school principals prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants and, where applicable, consent from their guardians. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting to protect identities. The study adhered to ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice, ensuring that learners' voices were represented with integrity and sensitivity. Special attention was given to creating a safe and inclusive interview environment, allowing participants to express themselves freely.

5. Findings

This study explored learners' experiences of cultural diversity and the development of intercultural competence within multicultural classrooms in Namibia. The thematic analysis of interview and focus group data, revealed three overarching themes: (1) Navigating Cultural Differences, (2) Pedagogical Responsiveness, and (3) Identity and Belonging. These themes reflect the multifaceted ways in which learners respond to and engage with cultural diversity in their learning environments. Each theme comprises several subthemes that illuminate the relational and pedagogical dimensions of intercultural learning.

The theme of Navigating Cultural Differences comprises subthemes such as language barriers, stereotypes and assumptions, and emerging empathy. Learners described both curiosity and discomfort in cross-cultural interactions, often negotiating misunderstandings through informal strategies. Pedagogical Responsiveness captures learners' perceptions of inclusive teaching practices, with subthemes such as group work, peer collaboration, and teacher sensitivity to cultural backgrounds. Finally, the theme of Identity and Belonging reveals how learners experience recognition or exclusion in classroom settings, shaped by cultural pride, marginalisation, and aspirations for unity.

5.1 Learners' Experiences of Cultural Diversity

Participants described multicultural classrooms as spaces of both enrichment and tension. The majority of participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to interact with peers from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, noting that diversity enhanced their understanding of others and broadened their worldview. However, experiences were not uniformly positive—some learners reported discomfort, exclusion, or miscommunication due to cultural misunderstandings. One participant expressed it this way: “I enjoy learning with friends from other cultures because I hear different stories and ways of thinking. It makes class more interesting.” (Participant 4).

On the negative side, one participant had this to say: “Sometimes I feel left out when others speak their native language and I don’t understand. It’s like I’m not part of the group. This kind of exclusion puts me off.” (Participant 11). These experiences reflect a dynamic interplay between curiosity, empathy, and the challenges of navigating cultural difference. However, many participants said they often develop informal strategies to existing challenges, such as asking questions, switching languages, or forming cross-cultural friendships.

5.2 Influence of Learner-Centred Approaches on Intercultural Competence

Data revealed that learner-centred pedagogies such as group work, peer teaching, and open classroom discussions, in particular played a significant role in fostering intercultural competence. Participants reported that collaborative tasks encouraged them to listen actively, interpret meaning, and appreciate diverse viewpoints. Many participants expressed the view that when teachers facilitated inclusive dialogue and allowed learners to share cultural experiences, learners felt more confident and respected.

One participant had this to say: “When we do group work, I learn how others think and how they solve problems. It is an excellent opportunity of not only learning about other cultures but also of being aware of cultural differences. This has helped me to understand the cultures of my friends better.” (Participant 7) Another participant said: “Our teacher lets us talk about our traditions and compare them. My friends and I are now culturally sensitive. We no longer see things only from our various cultural perspectives. Frankly, initially, I didn’t know how similar we are until we started having those discussions.” (Participant 2).

However, some participants observed that the effectiveness of learner-centred approaches differed depending on teacher facilitation. For example, participants said that in classrooms where teachers failed to acknowledge cultural diversity, learners felt disengaged and less inclined to participate. Similarly, in classes where teachers dominated the discussion, learners felt unrecognised.

5.3 Challenges or Opportunities in Multicultural Engagement

Participants identified several challenges in engaging with culturally different peers. These challenges include language barriers, stereotypes, and unequal participation in classroom activities. Some expressed the view that they felt hesitant to speak up due to fear of being misunderstood or judged. Others noted that cultural jokes or stereotyping sometimes led to tension or exclusion. One participant put it this way: “Sometime I want to share my ideas, but I worry they won’t get what I mean. I feel like they will laugh at my comment because I am a minority in the class. Being San, many in my class, including the teachers, know very little about my culture.” (Participant 9).

Another participant had this to say: “People sometimes make jokes about tribes, and even if they say it is funny, it hurts. It hurts especially if the joke is a negative one.” (Participant 6).

Despite these challenges, participants also recognised opportunities for growth in multicultural settings. Many participants highlighted the fact that exposure to diversity helped them develop empathy, adaptability, and a sense of shared humanity. Some expressed a desire for more structured intercultural

activities and teacher support to deal with sensitive topics. A participant put it succinctly like this: “I’ve learned that we are different, but we can still work together and learn from each other.” (Participant 1). In summary, the study revealed that learners in multicultural classrooms experience cultural diversity as both enriching and challenging. Many participants appreciated the opportunity to interact with peers from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, noting that such exposure broadened their perspectives and fostered curiosity and empathy. However, experiences of exclusion, particularly due to language barriers and cultural misunderstandings, were also acknowledged.

6. Discussion

This study explored learners’ experiences of cultural diversity and the development of intercultural competence within learner-centred classrooms in Namibia. The findings reveal a complex interplay between pedagogical practices, cultural identity, and social interaction. The findings thus offer insights that align with and extend existing theoretical and empirical literature.

6.1 Interpreting Cultural Diversity Through Learners’ Lived Experiences

Participants’ accounts of curiosity, discomfort, and exclusion in multicultural classrooms reflect the multiple facets of intercultural engagement. These findings resonate with Deardorff’s (2006) process model of intercultural competence, which emphasises attitudes of openness, respect, and adaptability. While many participants demonstrated a willingness to understand others, their experiences also revealed structural and interpersonal barriers such as language exclusion and stereotyping. These barriers hindered meaningful interaction. This supports Ninkova’s (2020) observation that cultural misrecognition persists in Namibian schools despite inclusive policy rhetoric.

The study also affirms sociocultural theory’s assertion that learning is mediated through social interaction and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners’ reflections on peer dialogue and informal strategies to bridge cultural gaps illustrate how intercultural learning is embedded in everyday classroom exchanges. These micro-level interactions are critical sites for identity negotiation and cultural meaning-making.

6.2 Learner-Centred Pedagogy as a Vehicle for Intercultural Competence

The role of learner-centred approaches in fostering intercultural competence was evident in participants’ appreciation for group work, peer teaching, and culturally inclusive discussions. These pedagogical strategies enabled learners to co-construct knowledge, listen actively, and reflect on cultural differences. This is in line with the core elements of both LCE and intercultural learning (Schweisfurth, 2013; Barrett et al., 2014). When teachers facilitated inclusive dialogue and acknowledged learners’ cultural backgrounds, learners felt more respected and engaged.

However, the uneven implementation of LCE across classrooms echoes findings by Awe (2007) and Ndemuweda (2018), who noted that teacher interpretations of learner-centred policy often diverge from its intended goals. In this study, participants in teacher-dominated classrooms reported lower levels of intercultural engagement. This suggests that pedagogical responsiveness is a key determinant of intercultural development.

6.3 Challenges or Opportunities in Multicultural Engagement

Learners’ experiences of exclusion, anxiety, and cultural joking highlight the emotional and relational challenges of multicultural schooling. These findings align with Chimbunde and Moreeng’s (2024) critique of the “one-size-fits-all” approach to multicultural classrooms management. This approach often fails to equip teachers with the skills to meander through the maze of multicultural classrooms

management. At the same time, learners' desire for unity and mutual understanding points to the transformative potential of intercultural education when supported by inclusive pedagogy.

The emergence of empathy, adaptability, and critical reflection among participants supports the argument that intercultural competence is not merely a cognitive skill but a relational and ethical disposition (Byram, 1997; Gay, 2010). This underscores the importance of creating pedagogical spaces that allow learners to engage with difference in meaningful and respectful ways.

In summary, the discussion highlights how learners' experiences of cultural diversity in Namibian classrooms are shaped by a mixture of pedagogical practices, cultural identity, and social interaction. Learners expressed both curiosity and discomfort in multicultural settings, revealing that while many were open to intercultural engagement, structural barriers such as language exclusion and stereotyping often hindered meaningful interaction. These findings align with Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence and affirm Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of peer dialogue and cultural tools in learning.

7. Conclusion, implications and recommendations

This study examined how learners in multicultural classrooms in Namibia experience cultural diversity and develop intercultural competence within learner-centred pedagogical environments. By foregrounding learners' voices, the research revealed that while diversity offers opportunities for empathy, collaboration, and cultural learning, it also presents challenges such as exclusion, stereotyping, and uneven pedagogical responsiveness. Learner-centred approaches were found to support intercultural development when implemented with intentionality and sensitivity. The findings affirm the relevance of intercultural competence as a key educational outcome in Namibia's diverse schooling context. They also highlight the critical role of inclusive pedagogy in shaping learners' cultural engagement.

The study underscores the need for educational policy to actively embed intercultural competence into curriculum frameworks, with clear learning outcomes and assessment tools. Teacher training programs (both pre-service and in-service) should incorporate intercultural pedagogy and cultural sensitivity, equipping educators with practical strategies for inclusive dialogue and identity recognition. At the school level, fostering culturally responsive environments through inclusive events, multilingual signage, and classroom practices such as peer collaboration and thematic discussions can significantly enhance learners' intercultural awareness and engagement.

In conclusion, it recommended that future research should broaden its geographic scope to include rural and peri-urban schools. This would enable a deeper understanding of how intercultural competence develops across diverse socio-cultural contexts. Comparative studies involving both learners and teachers could offer a more holistic view of classroom dynamics and pedagogical alignment. Longitudinal designs would also help track the evolution and sustainability of intercultural competence over time, while mixed-methods approaches could enhance the generalisability of findings through triangulation and richer data integration.

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